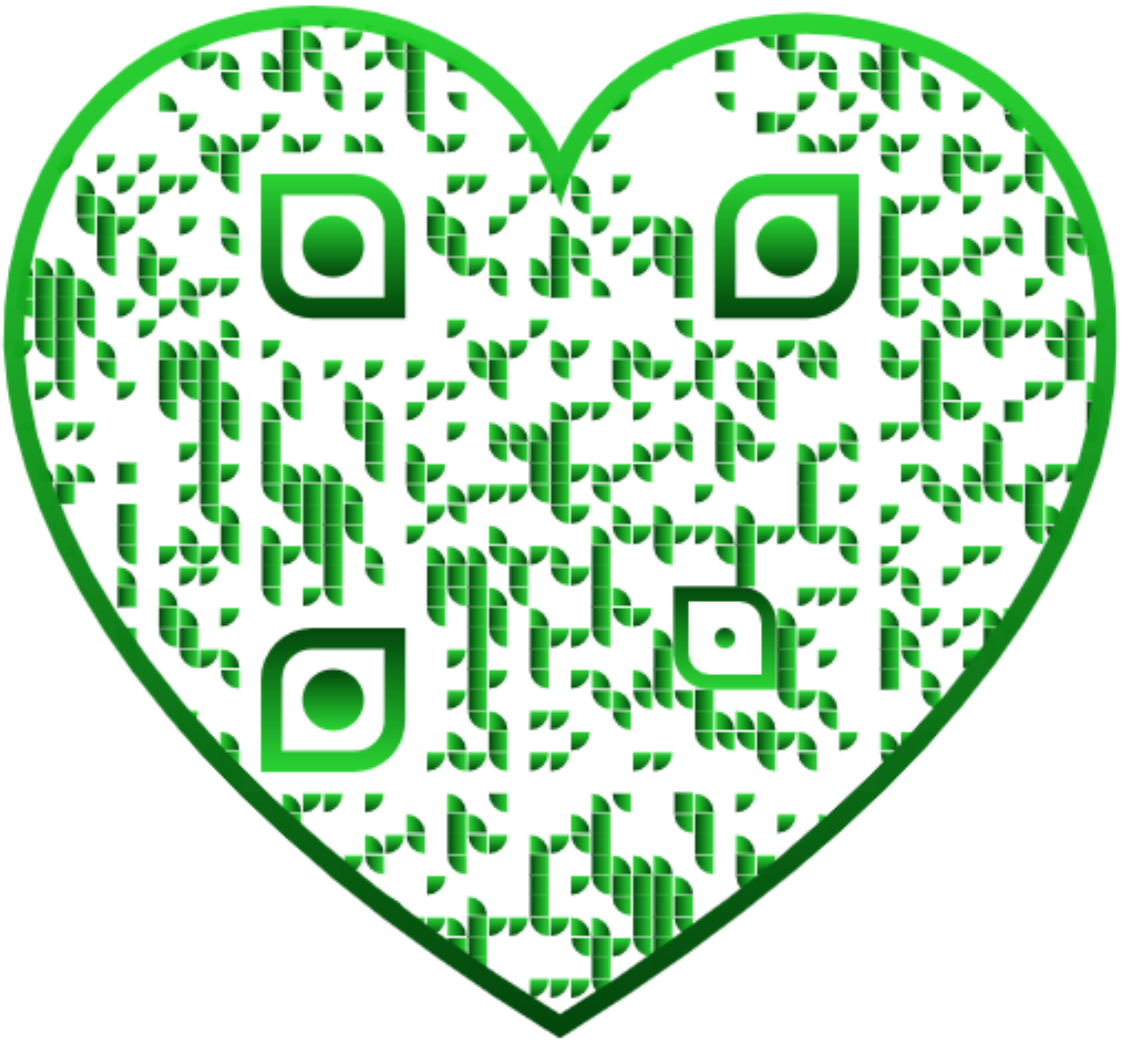
GREAT EMPIRES OF THE PAST

EMPIRES OF MEDIEVAL WEST AFRICA

Revised Edition

DAVID C. CONRAD



GREAT EMPIRES OF THE PAST

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GHANA, MALI, AND SONGHAY

REVISED EDITION

DAVID C. CONRAD

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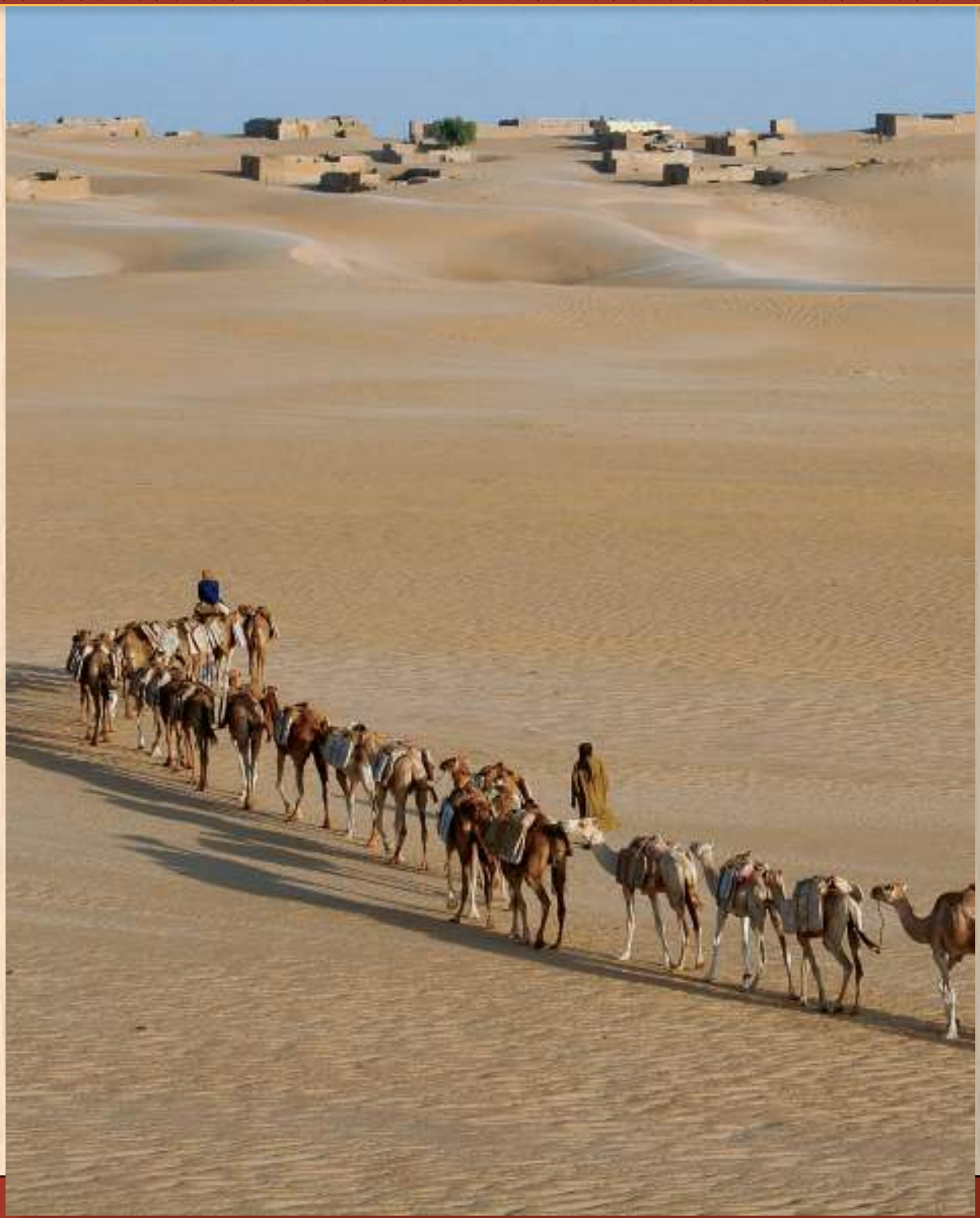


Introduction

THE GEOGRAPHY OF NORTHWESTERN AFRICA HAS SHAPED its history in dramatic ways. The Sahara Desert was an extremely important geographical feature in the history of the three great medieval African empires described in this book. Today the Sahara is the largest desert in the world. But it was not always so.

Rock paintings found in the mountains of the Sahara reveal that until about 5000 B.C.E., the region was a land of rivers and lakes. It was populated by hunters and fishermen, grassland animals such as rhinoceros, elephants, and giraffes, and water creatures including hippopotami, crocodiles, and fish.

By around 3000 B.C.E., the region had begun to dry out. Rock paintings from this period show that the big animals were gone. They had moved north and south to wetter climate zones. Many of the humans also moved northward into the Maghrib, which is the Arabic word for northwestern Africa (modern Morocco and Tunisia, with their shorelines on the Mediterranean Sea). Eventually, the dry region became known as the *Sahara*, which is the Arabic word for "desert."

Although it became more and more difficult to survive in the Sahara, many people stayed there. Some of them settled in oases—areas in the desert with springs and wells that enabled them to grow date palms and vegetable gardens. Today, the population of the Sahara is still about 2.5 million.

In addition to people living in the scattered oases, there are large communities along the fringes of the desert. The southern regions are the lands of the Sanhaja, who are nomads (people with no permanent

OPPOSITE

A salt caravan approaching Araouane, Mali, in its journey across the Sahara from the mines of Taoudenni to Timbuktu. This 2007 photo shows territory that was part of the medieval empires of both Mali and Songhay.

CONNECTIONS

What Are Connections?

Throughout this book, and all the books in the Great Empires of the Past series, there are Connections boxes. They point out ideas, inventions, art, food, customs, and more from this empire that are still part of the world today. Nations and cultures in remote history can seem far away from the present day, but these connections demonstrate how our everyday lives have been shaped by the peoples of the past.

home who move from place to place), and other groups of Berber peoples (Caucasian peoples of northwestern Africa). These people were important participants in the history of the great empires that developed below the Sahara Desert.

THE SAHEL

On the southern fringe of the Sahara is an area called the Sahel. This is where the land changes from desert to savanna (grassy plains with few trees). Sahel is the Arabic word for "shore." It is as if the Sahara were a great ocean of sand and rock, the camels that transport goods across the desert were ships, and the large market towns were seaports.

Nowadays the Sahel is semi-arid. The rainfall is irregular and there are cycles of drought (a shortage of water). The Sahel is drier now than the savanna grasslands. Camels are almost as important in the Sahel as they are in the nearby Sahara, because they can travel long distances in the dry region.

During the period from about 1000 B.C.E. to about 1000 C.E., however, the Sahel had a wetter climate. There was enough grass for cattle, sheep, and goats to graze. The soil was fertile enough for farmers to grow grains such as millet, sorghum, and *fonio* (a type of millet). In those times, it was possible to produce enough extra food to support people living in cities, who could not grow their own food.

Archaeologists (scientists who study past human civilizations) studying in the Sahel have found that the Mande people who lived there organized themselves into small settlements by about 1000 B.C.E. By about 600 B.C.E., there were large villages, and from 400 to 900 C.E., urban centers appeared in several areas of the Sahel. One of these urban centers was a place that is now called Kumbi Saleh. Some archaeologists believe it was the capital of the Ghana Empire, the first of the three great medieval empires in this book.

The Biggest Desert in the World

The Sahara stretches across Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, covering 3.3 million square miles. This represents about a third of the African continent, and is an area about the size of the United States.

The Sahara is one of the hottest places on Earth, with temperatures that can rise to 136 degrees Fahrenheit. What makes it a desert is not the heat, though, but the dryness. The Sahara receives less than 3 inches of rain a year. In comparison, a typical city in the United States such as Chicago gets 33.34 inches a year of rain, snow, and sleet. There are places in the Sahara where rain might fall twice in one week, and then not again for years.

Some people think of the Sahara as a great ocean of sand dunes. But the dune part of the desert, called the *erg*, actually makes up only about 15 percent of its area. Even so, the Sahara is so vast that some of the dunes are truly enormous. There is one known as the Libyan Erg that is the size of France.

About 70 percent of the Sahara consists of rocky plains covered with stones and gravel. The rest is mostly flat, stony plains of shale and limestone. There are also two mountain ranges: one in Algeria and the other in Chad.

THE BILAD AL-SUDAN

The savanna of sub-Saharan (that is, south of the Sahara Desert) West Africa was first described in writing by Arab travelers and geographers. They called it the Bilad al-Sudan, which means "land of the blacks" (*sudan* is the Arabic word for "black person"). Because that Arabic term was in the first written record of the region, the West African savanna came to be called the Western Sudan. The area has vast grasslands, widely scattered giant trees, and rainfall only during specific seasons. The Niger River and its many tributaries (rivers or streams that flow into a larger river) run through it.

Because the savanna offered grasslands for grazing and fertile soil for farming, the people who lived in the Western Sudan made the transition from basic survival by hunting animals and gathering plants, to methods that offered a more consistent food supply. They kept herds of animals such as cattle, sheep, and goats, and grew grains such as millet, *fonio*, and sorghum.

CONNECTIONS

Humped Cattle

Before 5500 B.C.E., there were no cattle of any kind south of the Sahara. But by 2000 B.C.E., cattle, sheep, and probably goats had been introduced to the area. The cattle herding peoples of the Western Sudan raise a breed of cattle called zebu that have a hump between their shoulders.

Zebu cattle were probably introduced from India. They are used primarily for milk production and are only rarely eaten for their meat. They are also sometimes used to carry heavy loads or for riding. These cattle cannot survive in the rainforest regions to the south of the savanna, because the forests are infested with tsetse flies. Tsetse flies are carriers of trypanosomiasis, or sleeping sickness, and the zebu have no immunity to that disease.

Nomadic Fula herd their Zebu cattle to market.

They produced more food than they needed themselves, so they began trading the surplus (extra) with neighboring peoples. Eventually, they learned how to use iron to make tools and weapons. Later, they began to use horses for transportation. These advances made it possible for some peoples of the Sudan to put together powerful armies and dominate others. The economic and military successes of these more powerful groups eventually led to the founding of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay—three of the greatest empires in African history.

THE NIGER RIVER

The Niger is the third longest river in Africa, after the Nile and the Congo. Its headwaters (the source of a river) rise less than 200 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. They flow northeast from the Fouta Djallon mountain range that spans the border of modern Sierra Leone and Guinea. The Niger River eventually empties into the Atlantic Ocean on the coast of Nigeria, about 2,585 miles from its mountain sources.

After flowing down from the highlands of Guinea, the Niger River is joined by many smaller rivers. It is about 1,000 yards wide by the time it slowly flows over the rocky riverbed at Bamako (the capital of today's Republic of Mali). Large riverboats cannot navigate on the Niger until a point that is about 37 miles past Bamako, near the town of Koulikoro. Even there, riverboat traffic is only possible during the months when the river is swollen by heavy rainfall in the highlands of Sierra Leone and Guinea.

When the Niger gets beyond the city of Segu in Mali, it joins the Bani River and flows into a flat plain. On this flat plain, the Niger branches into many different channels, creating a huge network of waterways—the Inland Delta.

South of the Sahel during the period after 5000 B.C.E., the great floodplain (an area of low-lying ground next to a river that sometimes floods) of the Middle Niger River became a refuge for populations who were leaving the desert. Gradually, through the centuries, the Inland Delta changed from a vast swamp into the kind of floodplain that exists there now. It is known as the Inland Delta to tell it apart from the other great delta in southern Nigeria, where the Niger River flows into the Atlantic Ocean. (A delta is a piece of land at the mouth of a river that is shaped like a triangle and formed by the mud and sand from flowing water.)

In a good year, heavy rains (up to 80 inches) begin falling in the Fouta Djallon mountains of Sierra Leone and Guinea in March and April. By July, the swollen waters begin to reach the Inland Delta, causing the river to overflow. This creates a massive, shallow lake up to 150 miles wide and 300 miles long.

The seasonal pattern in recent centuries has been that the Middle Niger River floods the Inland Delta. Then the floodwaters recede (go back), leaving behind a network of small creeks and waterways. In the northern regions, the floods leave behind many lakes. The Niger River and all the streams and lakes of the Inland Delta support many animals who live on and around the water, including hippopotami, manatees, crocodiles, and many species of fish.

The annual flood deposits a rich layer of silt (fine particles of ash, clay, and other material) that turns the region into an extremely productive agricultural zone. Through the centuries, more and more farming peoples competed for space in this rich environment to cultivate

One River, Many Names

The Mande people of the Mali Empire called the Niger River the Joliba. The people of Songhay called it the Issa Ber. The area on the Niger where the three great empires of the medieval period were located is called the Middle Niger.

For more than 1,000 years, even to today, the Niger River has been the lifeblood of millions of people in West Africa. Fishing (shown here), transportation, and irrigation are the main uses of the waterway.

their food crops. Meanwhile, herders competed for the best pasture land for their cattle.

Beyond the major cities of Segu and Jenne in Mali, the Niger River reaches the great trading port of Mopti. There it turns north. Then, through hundreds of miles, the river gradually turns back to the east as it passes Timbuktu, until it is flowing southeastward past Gao. This great turn in the river is called the Niger Bend.

Archaeological work has uncovered evidence that by 250 C.E. an urban population had developed at Jenne-Jeno in the floodplain between the Niger and Bani Rivers. Jenne-Jeno became one of the earliest cities of the Western Sudan. This probably happened about the same time that Kumbi Saleh was becoming the center of activity for the Ghana Empire far to the west. For some time at least, Jenne-Jeno would have been a prosperous city in the Inland Delta when the emperors of Ghana were ruling from their capital at Kumbi Saleh.

By 1000 C.E., the Niger River and neighboring regions supported widely scattered populations of fishermen, hunters, herders, and farmers. These people spoke a variety of languages. In the lands around the Sahara, the Berber peoples based their economies on raising camels, sheep, and goats, long-distance transportation, and raiding merchant caravans or forcing them to pay a toll.

Along the fringes of the Sahara, nomadic herders followed their livestock in yearly migrations to seasonal grazing lands. In the savanna, hunters pursued wild game such as lions, elephants, giraffes, gazelles, and hyenas. (All of these animals can still be found there.) On the rivers and lakes, fishermen using spears and nets harvested the many varieties of life that lived in the water.

But after 1200 C.E., the people of Jenne-Jeno began to move away. In the 13th century, that ancient city was abandoned. The question of where all those people went remains a mystery. However, about the time that Jenne-Jeno was going into decline, another city was rising a short distance away. In fact, it could be seen from the old city. Some of the people likely moved there. This newly developing city was called Jenne. Eventually, it became one of the most important cities of the Mali and Songhay Empires.

The Niger Bend area, which includes the vast Inland Delta, was the heartland of the Songhay Empire. It was such a desirable region that sometimes neighboring peoples would try to take control of the area. These attempts kept the armies of Songhay busy maintaining their control.

HISTORICAL RECORDS

The West Africans who laid the foundations of their medieval empires during the centuries before 900 C.E. did not develop a written language they could use to record historical events. Therefore, historians have a limited amount of evidence to draw on. Many of the events and dates in history from this time can only be approximate.

To learn more, archaeologists excavate (dig out) ancient cemeteries and the buried ruins of early towns and cities. Climatologists (scientists who study climate) examine ancient weather patterns and environmental changes. Linguists (scientists who study languages) who specialize in Arabic and Berber early scripts figure out writing on tombstones

dating from as early as 1013 C.E. Specialists in the Arabic language examine the writings of geographers who lived in Spain and North Africa. Ethno-historians (historians who study the history of particular ethnic groups) study the modern descendants of early peoples and think about how their ancestors lived. Other scholars interpret oral traditions passed on by word of mouth through many generations. These traditional stories contain no dates—just the local people's own sense of what happened to their ancestors in the distant past.

It takes experts to study and learn from each of these historical sources. Taken together, they provide all the information that is available on the history of West Africa's medieval empires.

The first people to write about ancient Ghana were Arab geographers who lived in North Africa and Spain. They began writing in the

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Which Way Does the Niger Flow?

Mungo Park (1771–1806) was born in a Scottish village, one of eight children in a poor farming family. He was an excellent student and eventually became a doctor. But he was more interested in adventure than in practicing medicine. He made two journeys to the Niger River: one from 1795 to 1797, and one in 1805.

In his day, Europeans knew the Niger River existed but none had ever seen it. They did not even know in which direction it flowed. Maps of the time showed it wandering across the Sahara and connecting to the Nile River. In fact, Arab geographers called it the "Nile" in their writings.

On Park's second trip, he tried to follow the river all the way to where it flows into the Atlantic. But he died at Bussa in what is now northern Nigeria.

Park kept a detailed day-to-day diary of his travels, and collected valuable information in it. This description is of the moment he first saw the Niger. He compared its width to the River Thames, which runs through London past Westminster Cathedral.

> *[L]ooking forwards, I saw with infinite pleasure the great object of my mission—the long sought for majestic Niger, glittering to the morning sun, as broad as the Thames at Westminster, and flowing slowly to the eastward. I hastened to the brink and, having drunk of the water, lifted up my fervent thanks in prayer to the Great Ruler of all things, for having thus far crowned my endeavors with success.*

(Source: Miller, Ronald, editor. *The Travels of Mungo Park*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1954.)

ninth century about kingdoms south of the Sahara. These are the best records to have survived to the present day.

In the eighth century, even before these Arab geographers had their first contact with the North African kingdoms, they were aware that the kingdom of Ghana existed below the Sahara. They had also heard there was a great river in the land of the Sudan, but they thought it must be the Nile. They knew the Nile was very long and that it began somewhere deep in Africa, but they had never heard of the Niger.

What got the Arab geographers' attention in the first place were stories they heard from travelers, who told tales of fabulous wealth to be found in Ghana. Late in the eighth century, Arab astronomer and scholar Ibrahim al-Fazari (d. ca. 777) called Ghana "the land of gold" (as quoted by N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins in *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*). Others repeated what he said. The Arab geographer al-Hasan ibn Ahmad al-Hamdani (ca. 893–945) declared that the richest gold mine on earth was in Ghana. For geographers such as al-Hamdani, Ghana was a mysterious place of darkness where there were "waters that make the gold grow" (from Levtzion and Hopkins).

THREE GREAT MEDIEVAL EMPIRES

The empire of Ghana was one of three great West African empires of the medieval period that were described by Arab travelers and geographers. An empire is formed when one kingdom becomes more powerful than its neighbors. The more powerful king forms an empire by conquering his weaker rivals and adding their lands and wealth to his kingdom.

After Ghana, the empire of Mali rose to power, and after Mali came Songhay. The three of them together dominated West African history for about 900 years.

From the eighth century to about the last part of the 12th century, Ghana was the major power south of the Sahara. It is recognized as an empire because the Arab geographer and historian Ahmad al-Yaqubi (d. 897), among others, described its king as very powerful, with lesser kings under his authority.

In the late 11th century, Ghana was seriously challenged for control of the trade routes that ran through the south. Awdaghust, Ghana's

most important commercial city, was captured by the Almoravids, a group of Sanhaja peoples who were part of the Islamic Empire. Ghana recovered its power for part of the 12th century, then went into decline for the final time.

These boys in modern-day Mali have just taken part in a centuries-old circumcision ceremony that marks their passage into adulthood.

Meanwhile, in the 11th century, a large region above the Upper Niger River fell under the control of the Susu, a southern group of the Soninke people. The Susu took control of the old Ghana territories for a time. Then they themselves were conquered by the Mali Empire.

Mali, the second of the great empires of the Western Sudan, was founded in the first half of the 13th century. Far to the south of ancient Ghana, a large group of Mande chiefdoms (little states run by chiefs) had been in existence for a long time. The Mande people are culturally related to the Soninke people of Ghana, but up to this time they had never been unified under one leader.

By the end of the 12th century, the Mande chiefdoms had fallen under the domination of the Susu. The Susu peoples were ruled by a powerful king named Sumanguru Kanté. Susu was one of several small kingdoms that were prosperous during the decline of Ghana and before the founding of Mali.

According to oral tradition, the Mande people's greatest hero was Sunjata Keita (sometimes spelled Sundiata). In the middle of the 13th century he united the Mande chiefdoms. Then he led them in a war that freed them from Susu domination and established the foundations of the Mali Empire, which would prosper until the late 14th century.

Songhay, the third of the medieval West African empires, began as a trading town called Gao on the eastern side of the Niger Bend. Gao (which the Arab geographers called Gawgaw) had its beginnings about the same time that Ghana was getting started, some time after 500. Gao eventually developed into a kingdom controlled by the Songhay people. These people have some cultural similarities to the Mande peoples of Ghana and Mali, but they speak a different language.

In the early 14th century, Gao was conquered by Mali and added to the Mali Empire. About 30 years later, the Mali Empire's influence had begun to decline. By the 1430s, Gao had regained its independence.

In the second half of the 15th century, a great ruler named Sii Ali Beeri (sometimes spelled Sunni Ali) came to power in Gao. He conquered many neighboring chiefs and kings, took over their territories, and established the Songhay Empire. The Songhay rulers controlled a vast empire in the Western Sudan. Their lands included eastern portions of the old empires of Ghana and Mali. Songhay was conquered by an army from Morocco in 1591.

Age Grade Societies

Historians try to mention people's birth and death dates whenever possible. This can be a problem in sub-Saharan African history, though, because many of the cultures, including the Mande, Songhay, and their neighbors, are not interested in people's birthdays.

Instead of focusing on individuals, which is common in countries with a European cultural heritage, these societies focus on groups. What is important is the three- to four-year span in which groups of children are born. Anthropologists (people who study human cultures) call these groups "age grades" or "age sets." Each village has one age grade for the boys and one for the girls. Children who are born in the same age grade bond and identify with one another throughout their lives. They also experience various rituals together as a group.

The most important ritual for boys is circumcision (cutting the foreskin of the penis), which officially marks the change from childhood to young adulthood. In early times this took place during puberty, but nowadays in the Western Sudan it tends to be done a few years earlier. In the societies described in this book, newly circumcised children live in a separate place outside the village while their wounds heal. While the children are isolated from the rest of the village, their adulthood ritual continues with lessons based on standards that were set by their ancestors. The lessons are designed to educate them about their responsibilities to one another and as citizens of the overall community.

One of the main purposes of age grades is to provide a sense of social togetherness that goes beyond the family. This is why, when a Mande person who is away from home meets another Mande, she or he will introduce a fellow villager as a brother or sister. Another purpose of age grades is that they make it easier to get large groups of people together for major tasks such as clearing land or, in early days, going to war.

The rights and duties of an age grade change as the people in it grow older and new age grades come up. Younger age grades are responsible for vigorous activities such as group farming, hunting, and warfare, while older age grades perform duties that require experience and good judgment, such as handling government and legal affairs.

ETHNIC GROUPS OF THE GHANA, MALI, AND SONGHAY EMPIRES

Africa is a huge continent (it is more than three times the size of the United States), and it has a great number and variety of cultures. The

native peoples of Africa include more than 1,000 different ethnic groups. Each has its own language and customs. In the modern country of Nigeria alone, there are more than 200 groups speaking languages that are not understood by the other groups. There are similar numbers of cultures in territories that were once home to the Ghana, Mali, and Songhay Empires.

The dominant peoples of both the Ghana and Mali Empires (and their modern-day descendants) were part of a huge, complex cultural group whose people, taken together, are known as Mande. Many groups speak regional variations of the Mande language and share ancient customs. These include the Bamana and Malinke (*Mali nké* means "people of Mali"), the Maninka of northeastern Guinea (*Mani nka* means "people of Mani," an ancient variation of "Mali"), the Mandinka of Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau (*Mandi nka* means "people of Mande"), and the Dyula of northern Côte d'Ivoire (*dyula* means "trader").

Many other related Mande groups are located between what is today southern Mauritania, western Burkina Faso, northern Liberia, and the Atlantic coast of Senegal and Gambia. One of the Mande groups on the fringe of this large group of cultures is the Soninke. They were the founders and rulers of the Ghana Empire.

In the Ghana Empire, another important culture was the Sanhaja, who came from the Berber peoples of North Africa. The Sanhaja were desert people and spoke a regional variation of the Berber language. Like their North African relatives, they subdivided themselves into large clans (groups of close-knit families). In the Western Sahara in the 11th century, the Sanhaja founded the Almoravid dynasty of the Islamic Empire.

Some of their most important clans were the Jazula, Juddala, Lamtuna, and Massufa. These fierce desert fighters, caravan guides (a caravan is a group of people traveling together), and traders competed with rival clans for control of major trade routes and market centers. They also competed with Zanata clans from North Africa and the Soninke of the Ghana Empire.

When the Ghana Empire lost its power, its territories and its people (including the Soninke, Sanhaja, and other ethnic groups) were eventually taken over by the Mali Empire. Inhabitants of Mali also included the desert-dwelling Tuareg, who are a Berber people like the Sanhaja. As the Mali Empire expanded, it also included the Songhay

What Is a Tribe?

Many people, including some anthropologists and other social scientists, describe African and other non-Western ethnic groups around the world (including native peoples of North and South America) as *tribes.* They use this word because it is short and convenient. But some people find it offensive. They believe the word suggests that the people are uncivilized or inferior, because it is only used to describe non-Western groups and very primitive Western peoples who lived far in the past. For this reason, the term *tribe* will not be used in this book. Instead, more descriptive terms such as *ethnic group, peoples, society, culture,* and *clan* will be used.

people of the Kingdom of Gao—which would eventually become the Songhay Empire.

Among the many other peoples of the Mali Empire were non-Mande ethnic groups who were identified with particular occupations. For example, the Dogon, Senufo, and many others were farmers. Nomadic cattle herders following the seasonal rains to find grass for their herds were called Fula. The Bozo and Somono were river specialists who built boats and canoes for fishing and transporting goods and people.

The dominant people of the Songhay Empire were known as Songhay. They spoke the Songhay language, which was not part of Mande culture.

With the decline of the Mali Empire and the rise of the Songhay Empire, the populations of a large part of the former Mali Empire became subjects of the Songhay rulers. Songhay also included many culture groups who had lived east of Mali and whose descendants now live in modern Burkina Faso, Benin, and Niger.

In addition to those groups already mentioned, many other cultures and ethnic groups lived in the Ghana, Mali, and Songhay Empires. Historians cannot be certain that the cultural differences seen today existed back in the 10th through 16th centuries. But the ancestors of the ethnic groups that are known today did live in these great medieval empires.

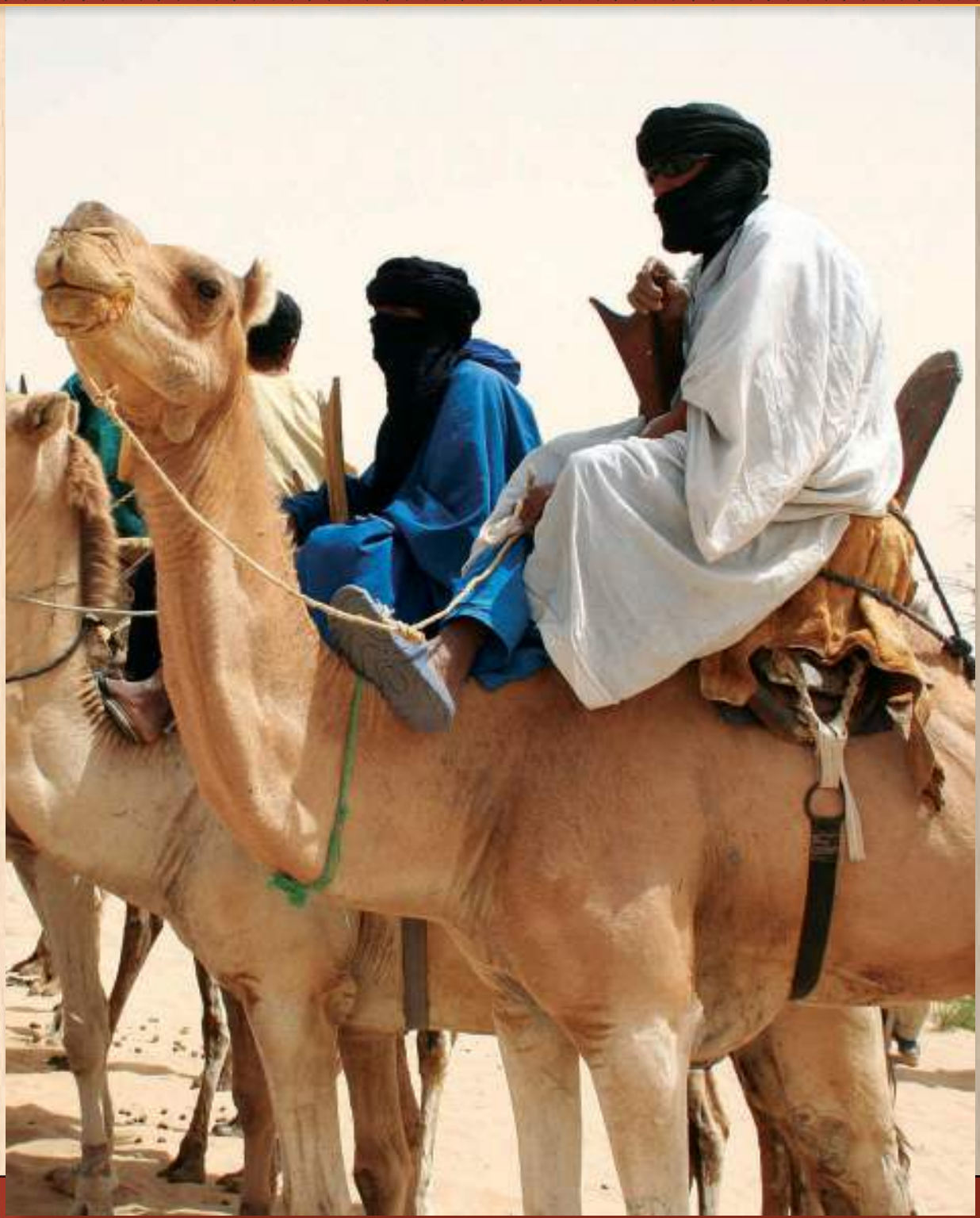
PART · I

HISTORY

THE GHANA EMPIRE

THE MALI EMPIRE

THE SONGHAY EMPIRE



CHAPTER 1

THE GHANA EMPIRE

THE LAND OF MEDIEVAL GHANA LAY FAR INLAND FROM the Atlantic coast of West Africa, and about 100 miles north of the Niger River in the sparse grasslands of the Sahel. One of the earliest of the medieval empires of that region was the Ghana Empire. It came into existence some time after 500 C.E. and lasted until late in the 12th century. (The name of the modern republic of Ghana was chosen in honor of that ancient kingdom, but there is no direct relationship between the two. Modern Ghana lies hundreds of miles to the southeast, on the Atlantic coast.)

The dominant people of ancient Ghana were the Soninke. They were the most northern of the Mande peoples, and they called their area Wagadu. Some ancestors of the Soninke were probably among the Stone Age farmers who began growing sorghum and millet in the Sahel grasslands from 3000 B.C.E. to 1000 B.C.E.

By about 1000 B.C.E., the Soninke's ancestors began establishing small settled communities, and around 600 B.C.E. these grew into large villages administered by chieftains. These early farmers were among the first to take advantage of the iron-working technology that developed in West Africa by about 500 B.C.E. to 400 B.C.E.

The Soninke were in contact with the nomads of the Sahara, from whom they acquired small horses brought from North Africa. The early Soninke's superior iron weapons and horses made it possible for them to establish a kingdom. They gradually expanded their territories and dominated neighboring rulers until, by the 10th century, the kingdom had become an empire.

OPPOSITE

The Berber people known as Sanhaja competed with the Soninke of ancient Ghana for control of the desert trade routes and market cities.

Ghana, the first of the three successive West African empires of the medieval age, spread north and east from the Sénégal River. Ghana reached its height in the early 11th century.

Visitors from North Africa began referring to the Soninke state as Ghana, but the Soninke themselves and other Mande peoples know the ancient kingdom as Wagadu.

THE LEGEND OF WAGADU

Just like other peoples of sub-Saharan West Africa, the Soninke have their own ideas of what is important about the distant past. They prefer to emphasize things such as family rivalries, the heroic deeds of their ancestors, and their ancestors' relationship with the spirit world.

The Soninke people's ideas about their history are expressed in the Legend of Wagadu. This is an oral tradition told by many generations of *gesere* (Soninke professional storytellers and musicians). Details vary from one version to the next, but the legend generally describes the origins and early deeds of the different Soninke clans.

The legend often begins by describing how the ancestor Dinga came from somewhere in the Middle East. Some say he stayed for a time at Jenne, an ancient city that still exists on the Niger River north of Bamako, the capital of modern Mali. Dinga later moved to the town of Dia on the Inland Delta of the Niger. There, he married and had two sons. They became Soninke ancestors in other towns of the Sahel.

Dinga's movements from place to place are the storytellers' way of explaining the presence of Soninke populations in various parts of the Sahel. Dinga is said to have eventually arrived at a place southwest of Nioro in today's Mali. When he arrived there, it was dominated by genies, or spirits, of the bush. Various versions of the legend describe a kind of magician's duel that took place between Dinga and the genies. Dinga won the contest and married the three daughters of the chief genie. Their sons became the ancestors of many Soninke clans. One clan was the Cissé. It was the Cissé that became the ruling clan of Wagadu.

In the next episode in the legend, Dinga had grown old and blind. He decided that before he died, he wanted to pass his chiefly power on to his oldest son, Khiné. But a younger son named Diabe Cissé disguised himself as the oldest brother and tricked his father into giving him the chiefly powers.

According to one version of the story, after Dinga died, Diabe Cissé had to run away from his angry older brother. He hid in the wilderness. One day a mysterious drum fell out of a tree and landed at his feet.

When he beat the drum, four troops of cavalry (soldiers who fight on horseback) came out from the four corners of the wilderness. The four commanders recognized Diabe Cissé as their leader and became his lieutenants. Later, after the kingdom was founded, they became chiefs or governors of the four provinces, and were known as *fado.*

Diabe Cissé set out to find a location where he could settle down. He wound up at a place that became Kumbi Saleh. It is located in the southern part of what is now Mauritania.

When Diabe Cissé arrived at the site where the town of Kumbi Saleh was to be established, he found it was guarded by a giant snake named Bida. In several versions of the legend, Bida is said to have lived in either a well or a cave. The great snake is usually thought of as a python. The python is a snake that often lives near streams and rivers, so having Bida take this form suggests the new settlement was located near water.

Diabe Cissé entered into an agreement with the snake Bida. They agreed that Diabe Cissé could settle there and Bida would remain the guardian of the place. They also made a deal that every year the great snake would be given the most beautiful young virgin. In return, Bida

CONNECTIONS

The Giant Rock Python

The giant African rock python is a nonpoisonous snake with a triangular head and a thick body. It is colored with shades of brown, yellow, and green. This python can grow to more than 20 feet long, and kills its prey by coiling around it and squeezing it to death. Pythons live around rivers and swamps.

The African rock python normally eats birds and small mammals. But the legends about it eating people are not so hard to believe.

In 2002 near Durban, South Africa, a 20-foot long snake swallowed a 10-year-old boy. According to local newspapers, the boy was picking mangoes when the python suddenly wrapped its coils around him, pinning his arms to his sides and squeezing him to death before eating him whole. Children who were with the boy were too frightened to run away, so they hid in the mango trees for several hours.

The only evidence found by police and snake specialists was a trail of flattened grass leading to a nearby stream. One theory was that the python had come out of its winter hibernation and was hungry when the boy showed up looking for mangoes. African rock pythons are a protected species in South Africa, so residents were told that if they found the snake, they should not kill it.

would guarantee that plenty of rain would fall on the region and that there would be lots of gold.

The new kingdom was called Wagadu, and its capital was Kumbi Saleh. It prospered under the rule of Diabe Cissé and his descendants, who were known by the title of *maghan*. The descendants of Diabe Cissé, and the descendants of the four *fado*, or commanders of the provinces, were recognized as the aristocratic clans (the clans with the highest social position) of the Soninke. These aristocratic clans were collectively called *wago*. That term, and the name of the kingdom, Wagadu, are probably related. "Wagadu" is a contraction of *wagadugu*, which can be translated as "land of the *wago*."

Once a year, representatives of the four provinces of Wagadu would assemble at Kumbi Saleh to participate in the virgin sacrifice to Bida, the guardian serpent. This ceremony was the annual renewal of the agreement between Diabe Cissé and Bida. According to some versions of the legend, each year a different province was required to supply a virgin for the sacrifice. If this was actually the practice, it was a custom that probably helped promote unity in the kingdom.

After an unspecified number of generations passed, a year arrived when the virgin to be sacrificed happened to be the girlfriend of a young aristocratic man. When the girl was about to be given to Bida, the young man leaped forward with his sword and cut off the snake's head. As Bida's head flew up into the sky, it pronounced a terrible curse that from that time on, no rain would fall on Wagadu and no more gold would be found there.

Without rain and gold, Wagadu declined and fell into ruin. The Soninke people moved away and the countryside became a desert.

Some versions of the legend have a final episode that is probably meant to explain how the Soninke people ended up in other places. It is said that the people of Wagadu were enraged that the young man killed Bida, the guardian of the kingdom. He was not a hero, but rather, the villain of the story. He had destroyed the security and well-being of the entire community. To show the importance of the guardian serpent, in some versions of the legend Bida was included in the royal family tree as an ancestor.

The snake killer had to flee for his life on a fast horse. One of his relatives, who also had a strong horse, was told to lead the chase. But he refused to harm his young relative.

The young man hid in a town to the south, at the home of his mother. When the angry mob caught up with him, his mother offered

to feed the people of Wagadu if ever there was a famine (a dangerous shortage of food).

IS THERE HISTORY IN THE LEGEND?

The Wagadu legend's magical elements are obvious. But parts of it reflect social and environmental realities that could have actually been a part of Soninke history.

The kind of competition seen between the younger brother, Diabe Cissé, and his older brother, Khiné, was common in families of the Soninke people. In the early history of the Western Sudan kingdoms, there are many stories of brothers being involved in bloody rivalries for their father's throne (especially in the Songhay Empire).

The offer made by the snake-killer's mother to provide for any refugees from Wagadu is also of interest. It corresponds to what one Arab geographer said about matrilineal descent (power passed to the son of the king's sister) in those early times. There might even have been instances of female chieftains.

Looking at the environmental elements in the legend, it is a fact that pythons are equally at home in the water and on land. Their presence was a sure sign of a climate with enough water to support a settlement, and this is suggested by the bargain struck between Bida and Diabe Cissé. In recent times, zoologists (scientists who study animals) have found that during the heat of the day in the dry season, pythons usually seek water in which to submerge themselves.

Before the arrival of Islam and Christianity in Africa, the great pythons were sacred religious symbols throughout sub-Saharan West Africa, from the Sahel to the Atlantic coast. So it is not difficult to see how the idea of the great snake as a highly spiritual water guardian could develop.

As for the riches symbolically linked with the great snake Bida, there is a real connection between rainfall and gold production. In ancient times, when the climate supported cities of the Sahel such as Kumbi Saleh, the annual rain fell very heavily, flooding otherwise dry gullies and washing gold into alluvial deposits (layers of sand, rock, and debris deposited by flowing water). In the ancient goldfields of Bambuk, the gold was collected from just such alluvial deposits.

If the climate of Ghana dried up and there was a drought for many years, the lack of an annual rush of water through the dry gullies would

mean no new deposits of gold. No water would also mean the farmers could not grow their food crops. The loss of both food and gold production from drought provides a possible environmental explanation for the gradual decline of the ancient kingdom of Wagadu. Historians believe this destruction was complete by the early 13th century.

REGIONAL AND TRANS-SAHARAN TRADE

In 738, a governor of the Maghrib sent a trading expedition to the "the land of the blacks"—Sudan. The expedition returned successfully, bringing slaves and gold. The trade seems to have originated not with the Arabs, but with the Berber peoples of the desert.

The most powerful of these desert Berbers were the Sanhaja, who lived in the Sahara and traded with the Soninke people who lived to the south. The Soninke's early involvement with the traders of the Sahara is one reason Ghana emerged as the first of the great medieval empires.

The other main reason is that Ghana controlled the sources of gold. "[T]he ruler of Ghana is the wealthiest king on the face of the earth because of his treasures and stocks of gold extracted in olden times for his predecessors and himself," wrote Arab geographer Muhammad ibn Hawqal (10th century) in 988 (quoted in N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins's *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*).

As has already been mentioned, efficient food production, early control of iron technology for superior weapons, and having horses helped the Soninke achieve

CONNECTIONS

Kola Nuts and Cola

The kola nut is not really a nut, but the edible seed of several species of evergreen trees. These trees are native to the tropical rainforests of Africa. The nut is either pink or yellow and is roughly the size of an unshelled walnut or a golf ball.

The nut contains caffeine. In many West African cultures, people chew it, individually or in a group, to ease hunger and feel renewed. Kola nuts first have a bitter taste, then turn sweet.

In West Africa, the kola nut is considered a symbol of hospitality. It can be divided easily into several segments to be shared between host and guests. It is used in marriage, birth, funeral, and other ceremonies.

In the late 1800s, kola nuts began to be exported to the United States. Originally, the "secret" ingredient flavoring all cola drinks (including Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola) was extracted from kola nuts. Today, most manufacturers use artificial flavorings that resemble the taste of kola nuts to flavor cola soft drinks. But some premium brands of cola still use the original kola nut.

The Coming of the Camel

The one-humped camel was originally domesticated (tamed for use by humans) in southern Arabia around 5000 B.C.E. and was introduced into northeastern Africa around 3000 B.C.E. From northeastern Africa, the Romans brought the camel to the Sahara Desert in the first century C.E. As a result, regular and extensive trade across the Sahara became possible.

early superiority over their neighbors. Arab geographer Ahmad ibn al-Yaqubi described Ghana as one of the two most powerful kingdoms of the Western Sudan. He said Ghana's ruler had other kings under his authority.

What eventually raised the Soninke kingdom to the level of an empire was its control of both regional trade and trade across the Sahara Desert. The regional trade involved the exchange of salt, copper, and dates from the Sahara. Products from the savanna areas included slaves, livestock, iron tools, iron weapons and utensils, animal hides, leather goods such as sandals, cushions, and bags, locally woven and dyed cloth, clay pottery, woven grass products such as baskets and sleeping mats, medicinal herbs, and foods such as dried fish, rice, various grains, spices, honey, and fruit. From farther south, nearer the forest, came gold and kola nuts.

Beyond this regional trade, Ghana was well positioned to dominate the international caravan trade that went across the Western Sahara and on to the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea. One of the reasons such commercial development was possible was the introduction of the camel into North Africa.

The camel is often referred to as the ship of the desert. Because of its unique physical characteristics, the camel can survive in very dry climates. Its large, flat feet are well suited for walking across the shifting sands. The camel could also carry large loads for many days without food or water.

In the second and third centuries C.E., the use of camels quickly expanded among North African Berber peoples. The Sanhaja people of the western Sahara acquired large numbers of camels by the fourth and fifth centuries. As a result, they began to develop and control increasingly busy desert trade routes. The caravans that crossed the Sahara Desert (a route called "trans-Saharan") could consist of as few as six camels or as many as 2,000. They usually left North Africa in April or May, and were led by professional Sanhaja guides who could find the wells and water holes that dotted the desert.

The dangerous journey lasted from two and a half to three months, depending on the size of the caravan and the conditions of the route. Unusually dry years could leave the wells with insufficient water. If a severe sandstorm came up, it could bury the entire caravan alive.

Ghana's location in the Sahel enabled the Soninke people to control commerce from the savanna and forest zones in the south, and the

Camel caravans continue to be an important part of trade and travel in West Africa. Camels are known as the "ships of the desert" because they can carry heavy loads over long distances with little or no water.

Sahara and Maghrib (northwest Africa) in the north. The northward trade passed over a network of routes connecting Ghana not only with the Maghrib, but also with Tripoli and Egypt.

The geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi (1179–1229), a freed slave of Greek origin who became a Muslim, described Ghana's commercial position (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins): "Merchants meet in Ghana and from there one enters the arid wastes towards the land of Gold. Were it not for Ghana, this journey would be impossible, because the land of Gold is in a place isolated from the west in the land of the Sudan. From Ghana the merchants take provisions [food and water] on the way to the land of Gold."

The trans-Saharan trade southward mostly involved manufactured objects and various luxury goods from the Mediterranean world, Europe, and North Africa. They included iron products such as knives, scissors, needles, and razors, brass and copperware, luxury garments of silk, velvet, and brocade, glass and porcelain beads, other kinds of ornaments and jewelry, mirrors, carpets, perfumes, paper, tea, coffee, and

The Land of Gold

The early Arab geographers who wrote about Ghana described it as an exotic land of mystery and wealth. That became the essence of Ghana's reputation in the Muslim world. Some Arabic writers had fantastic ideas about gold just lying around, waiting to be picked up and carried home. Classical writer Ibn al-Faqih al Hamadhani (d. ca. 912) said, "In the country of Ghana gold grows in the sand as carrots do, and is plucked at sunrise." (quoted in N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins's *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*).

About the end of the 10th century, the anonymous author of *Akhbar al-Zaman* claimed that traders would secretly slip into the kingdom of Ghana where "all the earth . . . is gold." He said they would build fires, melt the precious metal, and steal away with it. The same author mentioned a traveler in Ghana who "found. . . places where stalks of gold were growing" (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins).

We know such tales continued to be told for a long time, because in the 14th century, Syrian historian and geographer al-Umari (1301–1349) was still describing two kinds of plants that had roots of gold.

sugar. Horses from North Africa were one of the most important items moving south. So were cowrie shells, which were used as currency in West African markets.

Salt, dates, and copper were traded northward out of the Sahara. From the forest region went gold and kola nuts. From the savanna went slaves, elephant and hippopotamus ivory, ostrich feathers, wild and domestic animal hides, and gum arabic (obtained from acacia trees and used in the manufacture of ink, textiles, and drugs).

THE CITY OF AWDAGHUST

During the period of Ghana's greatest power in the late 10th and early 11th centuries, one of the most important commercial cities under its control was Awdaghust. This city was about 125 miles northwest of Kumbi Saleh. Abu Ubayd al-Bakri (d. 1094), an Arab scholar living in Islamic Spain, described it as a large, crowded town with well-built, handsome houses. The buildings sat on sandy ground below a big mountain that had absolutely nothing growing on it.

Most of the population was Muslim traders from Ifriqiya (the North African region between the Maghrib and Egypt). Al-Bakri said the local farmers grew wheat, sorghum, date palms, fig trees, and henna shrubs (the leaves of which produce a reddish brown dye). The vegetable gardens were watered using buckets, which was the usual method in Sahel towns and Sahara oases.

Awdaghust sat on a trade route for gold that was shipped northward to the city of Sijilmasa in southern Morocco. There the gold was minted into coins. The caravan journey between Awdaghust and Sijilmasa took two months. The Arab geographer Ibn Hawqal visited Sijilmasa in 951 and reported seeing a steady stream of trade with the lands south of the Sahara. He saw "abundant profits and the constant coming and going of caravans" (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins).

The main traders of Awdaghust were Berbers of the Zanata clan. They were from the Atlas mountain region in Morocco. In the 10th century, Zanata traders in the city began to dominate the trans-Saharan trade between Awdaghust in the south and Sijilmasa in the north.

But it was the Sanhaja nomads of the desert who really held power over the markets. The Sanhaja are sometimes called "the people of the veil" because the men covered their faces (not the women, as is the case in many Muslim societies).

The Sanhaja avoided living in the city because they preferred living in tents and wandering the open land on their camels. From out in the desert, they asserted great authority over all the routes leading to the cities. The Sanhaja got their income from controlling these trade routes. They were the guides and protectors for some caravans, but they demanded tolls from others. Sometimes, they simply raided and robbed caravans.

The Sanhaja also profited from trade centered in Awdaghust by sharing control of the city with the Zanata Berbers. But around the middle of the 11th century the Soninke of Ghana took control of Awdaghust. The Zanata traders of the city accepted Soninke authority. This caused the Sanhaja people of the desert to lose an important source of income, so they continued to compete with the Soninke for control of trade and had a great impact on 11th century Ghana

Eventually, many Sanhaja clans unified into a powerful Islamic state that recaptured Awdaghust from the Soninke. The unified Sanhaja groups came to be known as the Almoravids. The Almoravids were strict Muslims who took control of Islamic Northwest Africa around

CONNECTIONS

Money Cowries

In sub-Saharan West Africa, cowries were the most popular currency for many centuries. These so-called "money cowries" are the shells of small snail-like creatures that live in the tropical waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

As early as the 13th century, Arab traders were carrying cowries from the Maldive Islands in the Indian Ocean to Egypt, then across the desert to the markets of sub-Saharan West Africa. Europeans were interested to find that Africans usually preferred cowries to gold when doing business. By the 16th century, the shells were being imported in the ships of Dutch and English traders to the Guinea coast of West Africa.

As the Atlantic slave trade grew, cowries were among the items Europeans exchanged with coastal West African groups for slaves. By the early 18th century, cowrie shells were becoming the bubble wrap of their day. Tons of them were exported from South Asia to Europe to cushion porcelain and other fragile items, and then exported again from Europe to Africa.

In 2003, evidence of their use in the slave trade was found in Yorktown, an important 18th-century Virginia port. On property once owned by a slave trader named Phillip Lightfoot, archaeologists found hundreds of cowries in a trash dump dating to about 1760. Also in Virginia, a single cowrie was found at Monticello, the home of President Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826). The shell was found during the excavation of a storage cellar beneath a slave house that was occupied from the 1770s to the 1790s. A hole and small grooves on the cowrie indicate that it was worn as jewelry. People who have examined it think it was probably carried to Virginia attached to the clothing of an African slave.

Cowrie shells were originally used as currency. Today they are used for decoration, such as on clothing or on this Bamana Ntomo mask.

In West Africa, cowries are still used for many things, including decorating clothing, drums, and headdresses, and on sculptures used in rituals, such as masks and statuettes. They are also used to predict the future. Fortune-tellers toss handfuls of them to make predictions that are based on whether the shells land with the open side up or down.

1085. The Almoravid Empire eventually reached from the Sénégal River through the Maghrib into Spain.

THE ALMORAVIDS

Some time during the eighth century, the Zanata and other Berbers of the Atlas region became Muslims. Later, the Sanhaja were also converted to Islam. The religious conversion gave them all wider commercial connections with the Muslim world. This increased the scale and complexity of their trade, and generally made them more prosperous.

It was in the century following the Soninke takeover of the city of Awdaghust, that the Sanhaja became involved in the Almoravid movement. This had a great influence on the spread of Islam, which was a major factor in West African history.

At the beginning of the 10th century, the Sanhaja were masters of the Western Sahara. But they were spread over a vast territory and were divided into clans. They dominated trade routes and salt mines. The clans living in the southern part of the desert were the Juddala and the Lamtuna, who bordered the kingdom of Ghana. Control of Awdaghust was disputed between the Lamtuna and the Soninke.

Islam was spreading through the region, but it was weaker and less strict in the south than it was in the north. Around 1035, the chief of the Juddala clan, Yahya ibn Ibrahim (d. ca. 1039; his name is Arabic for "John, son of Abraham"), made a pilgrimage (a journey to a special sacred place) to Mecca (in today's Saudi Arabia). During his long journey to the Muslim holy land, Yahya realized that his people back in the Western Sahara had only a very basic idea of what Islam was about. They were not behaving like the stricter Muslims in Arabia and North Africa.

On his way home, Yahya visited with a famous Muslim theologian (someone who studies religion) in the city of Qayrawan. Yahya asked the theologian if he had a very wise follower who could come back with him to the Sahara to teach true Islam. But nobody at Qayrawan was willing to suffer the hardships of living in the desert. So they sent Yahya to a religious center in southern Morocco, where he met Abdallah ibn Yasin (d. 1059). Yasin's mother was a Sanhaja of the Jazula clan from a desert town near Ghana, and Yasin had no fear of living in the Sahara.

In 1039, Yahya arrived back at the tents of his Juddala people. Yasin was with him. As a teacher of Islam, Yasin proved to be a strict master.

Muhammad and the Islamic Empire

Islam was founded by Muhammad (570–632), who was born in the Arabian city of Mecca. His name means "worthy of praise" in Arabic. After the age of eight, Muhammad began accompanying his uncle on long caravans. When he was 25, he married a wealthy 40-year-old widow named Khadijah (d. 620), whose husband had been the owner of the caravans.

In 610, Muhammad reported that while he was on retreat in a mountaintop cave near Mecca, he was visited by the angel Gabriel. He received the first of a series of divine revelations that would become part of the Quran, the sacred book of Islam.

Eventually, making a pilgrimage to Mecca, as Yahya ibn Ibrahim did, became a religious requirement for all Muslims. But Mecca was already an ancient center of pilgrimage long before Islam because it was the location of the Kaaba. The Kaaba is a one-room structure made of dark stone that is home to the sacred Black Stone. This stone, embedded in one of the walls, is believed to have been placed there originally by Adam, the first man, and later by the prophet Abraham (from whom the Arabs say they are descended). Before Islam, the Kaaba was also thought to be the home of the god Hubal and more than 300 other minor gods.

Muhammad began an effort to renew the ancient religion of Abraham. He believed in worship of one god (Allah in Arabic). In the next few years, Muhammad and his followers fought and won a series of battles against the local ruling clans and their allies. Eventually, they established a great empire. After his death, the expansion of the Islamic Empire continued. Within 100 years, it extended from India to Spain.

He was determined to convert everyone, even if he had to do so under the threat of physical harm.

At one point, along with Yahya, Yasin led the Juddala to attack a branch of the Lamtuna clan and force them to join his new religious movement. Yasin's strictness and attitude of superiority over the local people were deeply resented by the Juddala. He became increasingly unpopular. He survived under the protection of Yahya. But when Yahya died, the Juddala looted and destroyed Yasin's house and exiled him from the community.

Yasin fled with some devoted followers and went into hiding at a kind of fortified monastery (a place where monks live) called a *ribat*.

In 1042–1043, three or four years after going into hiding, Yasin left the *ribat* as supreme leader of a powerful new religious movement.

His followers were called the Almoravids, from the Arabic word *al-murabitun*, which means "people of the *ribat*." Yasin soon formed a new alliance with Yahya ibn Umar (d. 1056), chief of the Lamtuna. They became the dominant force of the Almoravid movement.

The essential concern of the Almoravids was that the laws of Islam should be strictly observed. They wanted all the rules to be followed: prayer and fasting (not eating anything), not drinking alcohol or eating forbidden foods, making the pilgrimage to Mecca, and learning the Quran, the Muslim sacred book.

They were prepared to promote these things by force through jihad, or armed struggle. This meant the Almoravids had to have a firm base from which to launch their military campaigns, and that the clans involved had to be united. They began a campaign to incorporate the Massufa and other Sanhaja peoples of the Southern Sahara into their

In many Muslim societies women wear the veil, but among the Berber Sanhaja nomads and their Tuareg relations elsewhere in the Sahara, it is the men who cover their faces. They do this for protection against the dust and sand blown by desert winds.

movement. Some Sanhaja clans continued to rebel. But most of them joined the alliance and were united into an effective political federation of desert clans.

As soon as Yasin knew he had a strong enough army, he returned to the lands of the Juddala clan and killed the ones who had rebelled against him. By 1048, the Almoravids had become the most powerful force in the Western Sahara. But they still had many battles ahead of them. In 1054 they recaptured Awdaghust from the Soninke of Ghana. In the same year, they marched north through the Sahara and captured the great trading city of Sijilmasa in southern Morocco, where gold coins were minted.

In 1056, the Almoravids learned Sijilmasa had been taken back by the Zanata, its former rulers. Yasin and most of his army marched north to recapture that city. But in the south the Juddala had revolted again. Umar, the Lamtuna chief, had to stay behind to face the Juddala, and was killed in the fighting. His brother, Abu Bakr ibn Umar (d. 1087), took his place as supreme military commander of the Almoravids.

In 1059, on one of many later Almoravid campaigns, the movement's founder, Yasin, was killed.

THE ALMORAVID IMPACT ON GHANA

In 1056, when the Almoravids captured Awdaghust from Ghana, the Zanata merchants there were punished for having cooperated with the Soninke. Many Soninke of Ghana had held on to their traditional religious rituals with the sacred serpent and other spirits. But because of the powerful Almoravid influence, in the following years they were converted, sometimes by force, to Islam.

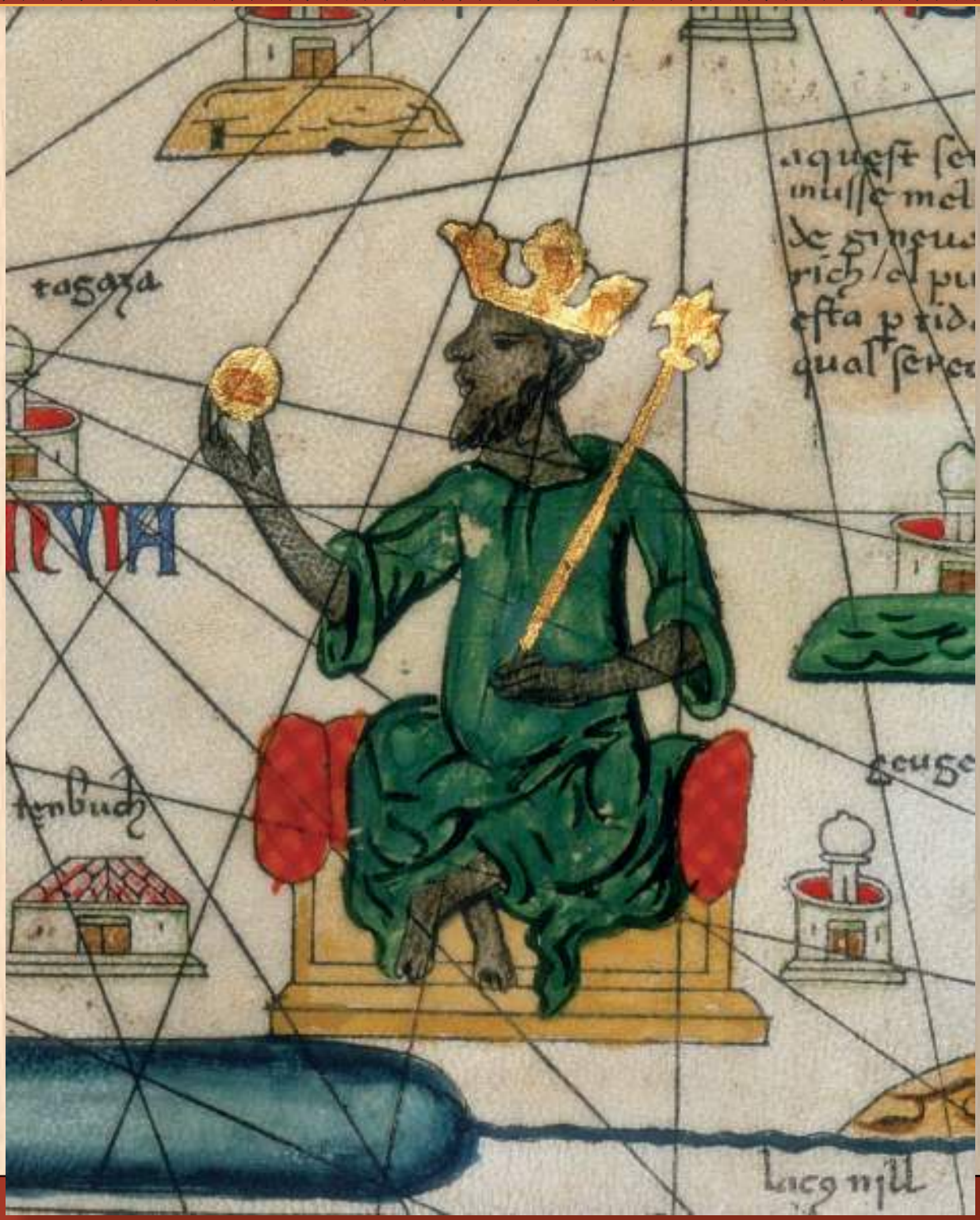
The Almoravid commander Abu Bakr died in 1087. He was replaced by six men from among his sons and nephews. The six men fought with one another in a power struggle that destroyed Almoravid unity. This cost them whatever advantage they had gained over the Soninke. As a result, by around 1100 Ghana regained its commercial and political dominance.

The Arab geographer al-Idrisi (1099–1166), writing in 1154 (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins), thought of "Ghana" as a single city. He described it as "the greatest of all the towns of the Sudan in respect of area, the most populous, and with the most extensive trade." Some modern scholars believe this is supported by archaeological digs at a

site called Kumbi Saleh. The evidence indicates that this important city of the Ghana Empire (though maybe not its capital) was still prosperous in the 12th century.

In the 12th century, Ghana gradually lost its dominant position in the Sahel. Climate change, the desert expansion into formerly fertile land, and decades of struggle with the powerful Sanhaja groups of the Western Sahara, pushed many Soninke to move to more prosperous areas. The city of Walata, which was about 75 miles to the northeast of Kumbi Saleh, had taken over as the main southern endpoint of the trans-Saharan trade.

The decline of the Soninke left a power vacuum in the Western Sudan. For a time it was filled by some smaller savanna kingdoms to the south, which were closer to rivers and lakes and where there was better rainfall. In the first half of the 13th century, the Malinke chiefdoms of the Upper Niger began to join together into a new state that would eventually rise to become the Mali Empire.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CHAPTER 2

THE MALI EMPIRE

WHILE THE GHANA EMPIRE WAS GRADUALLY DECLINING, the Soninke people who left its cities helped found several smaller kingdoms. The small Soninke states of Kaniaga, Diara, and Mema rose to the south of Ghana. The savanna lands there were closer to the Upper Niger River and its tributaries and had a less harsh climate.

By the 12th century, some of the kings of these small states were Muslims. But most of the populations continued to practice the polytheistic (worship of more than one god) religion of their ancestors. One of the strongest of these states was Susu. It was ruled through a powerful family of blacksmiths with the family name of Kanté. A blacksmith is someone who works with iron. The traditional priests of many Mande peoples have usually been blacksmiths, because they knew the secrets of how to use fire to turn raw iron ore into tools and weapons that were essential for daily life.

By late in the 12th century, Susu had expanded into neighboring regions and extended its authority over part of the old Ghana Empire. The kingdom was centered in a region that is now called Beledougou. It is northeast of Bamako, the capital of today's Republic of Mali. The local people identify their communities with ancient Susu, and there is even a village called Susu.

Most of the information about the Susu kingdom comes from Mande oral tradition and cannot be confirmed by independent sources. There is no material evidence to support this oral tradition, because no archaeological excavations have been done in that region. But the existence of a Susu kingdom is confirmed by Arab geographers.

OPPOSITE

A Spanish map from 1375 includes this illustration of the emperor Mansa Musa holding up a nugget of the gold that drew so many traders to West Africa.

Ibn Khaldun (1332–ca. 1406), who was born in Tunis and died in Cairo, never traveled south of the Sahara himself. But while he was in Cairo, he interviewed people from the Mali Empire. From them he learned that Susu was the most powerful of the new kingdoms, and that it had taken over some of the old territories of Ghana.

According to Mande oral tradition, the Susu ruler early in the 13th century was Sumanguru Kanté. He was described as a great sorcerer and a ruthless conqueror. Just to the south of Susu, in the land of Manden, there were many small chiefdoms of the Mande people on both banks of the Niger River. These chiefdoms were basically independent, although they shared cultural institutions, traded with one another, and married people from different chiefdoms.

At the beginning of the 13th century, Sumanguru expanded his territory southward. He conquered the Mande chiefdoms and added them to his Susu Empire.

THE SUNJATA EPIC

The Mande people's own story about the origin of the Mali Empire is usually known as the Sunjata Epic. It is named for Sunjata Keita, who is credited with founding the Mali Empire. (An epic is a story about the actions and adventures of heroic or legendary figures or about the history of a nation.)

The story begins some time around the beginning of the 13th century in Farakoro, which was a Mande chiefdom. Farakoro was near the goldfields of Buré. These goldfields had been one of the main sources of gold for Ghana in earlier centuries, and they became important for the Mali Empire, too.

The chief of Farakoro was Maghan Konfara (*maghan* means "chief" and Konfara was the town he lived in). Like all chiefs and kings of his day, Maghan Konfara had diviners whose job it was to predict the future. One day, the diviners told Maghan Konfara that he would be the father of a great hero, but that the woman who would be the hero's mother had not yet been found. Maghan Konfara already had many other wives, but he had to search for this special woman.

After a long search, the woman was finally located in the kingdom of Do ni Kiri. She was Sogolon Condé, a sister of the *mansa* (king). Sogolon was an ugly, hunchbacked woman. But she had frightening powers as a sorceress and was recognized as the woman who was des-

tined to give birth to this great hero. So she was brought to Farakoro and married Maghan Konfara.

Maghan Konfara's other wives were jealous of the diviners' prediction and did everything they could to stop Sogolon from giving birth to the hero. After several years of trouble, Sogolon had a baby. But the child was born crippled. He was called Sogolon's Jara (*jara* means "lion"), which was shortened to Sunjata (abo spelled Sundiata). It took years for Sunjata to learn to walk. But when he finally did, he became a great hunter.

One of Maghan Konfara's other wives had a son who was born before Sunjata. The other wife knew the diviners had predicted that Sunjata would be a great hero. But she was determined that her son would be the next chief. She tried to have Sunjata murdered.

Sogolon then took him and her other children away to protect them. They stopped in various chiefdoms along the way. Eventually, they traveled northeast to the lands beyond Timbuktu and settled in the old Soninke kingdom of Mema.

Malian women working in the ancient Malian goldfields of Buré use calabashes to pan for gold dust.

While Sogolon and her children were gone, the Mande chiefdoms were conquered by the army of Susu, which was led by its powerful king, Sumanguru Kanté. The Mande people suffered for a long time under the harsh rule of Sumanguru. Then they remembered that many years earlier the diviners had predicted that Sogolon would give birth to a great hero.

They did not know where Sogolon and her children had gone, but they sent out a search party that eventually found them. Sogolon had died in Mema, but her children, who were now adults, returned to Manden.

Sunjata organized the soldiers of all the Mande chiefdoms into a powerful army. They went to war against Susu. After a series of battles, Sunjata's army defeated Sumanguru and the army of Susu. The unified Mande chiefdoms formed the basis of a powerful kingdom. It expanded into all the neighboring territories and became the Mali Empire.

The Mande oral traditions do not give dates for the events they describe. But, based on what was written by Arab geographers, it appears that Susu was defeated some time in the 1230s.

FROM SUNJATA TO SAKURA

There are three Arab geographers and historians who have provided the most detailed information about the medieval Mali Empire: al-Umari, Ibn Battuta (1304–1368), and Ibn Khaldun. Ibn Khaldun reported that Mali became the greatest power in the Western Sudan. He said the greatest king of Mali overcame the Susu and conquered their country, and was named Mari Jata. This is one of the praise names (substitutes for a person's name that describe his or her best characteristics or deeds) local people still use for Sunjata.

According to Ibn Khaldun, Sunjata ruled for 25 years. When he died, his son Mansa Wali became king. Mansa Wali is remembered as a great king. He was a Muslim, and he made the pilgrimage to Mecca during the reign of Sultan Baybars of Egypt. Sultan Baybars ruled from 1260 to 1277, so Mansa Wali made his pilgrimage some time between those dates.

Despite becoming one of the greatest empires of the medieval era, Mali suffered from serious leadership problems throughout its history. Mansa Wali was followed by a brother named Wati, who is not remembered for anything special. After Wati came a third brother named Khalifa, who is remembered for the wrong reasons. Khalifa was insane, and practiced archery (shooting with a bow and arrow) by shooting arrows at his own people and killing them. Eventually, the people killed him.

The next *mansa* was Abu Bakr. He was the son of one of Sunjata's daughters—a sister of the three previous kings. This is similar to the matrilineal descent that was the custom in the Ghana Empire, where the kingship went to the son of the previous king's sister.

Although there are no records of it, Mali's leadership problems must have continued. This seems likely because the next *mansa* was not even a member of the royal family. He was a military commander named Sakura (r. 1298–1308), who grabbed the throne. Sakura probably had many people's approval when he seized power, because the royal family was not providing good leadership.

In about 1307, Sakura made the pilgrimage to Mecca. If the Malians did not support his kingship, he would not have gone away for the months such a journey required. A king without support would have been overthrown while he was away.

In fact, Sakura turned out to be one of Mali's greatest kings. He brought political stability to the empire. This enabled trade from North Africa to flourish and increased Mali's prosperity. Sakura also expanded the empire into new regions. He pushed the eastern frontier into the Songhay lands. It was probably during his reign that Mali also took control of the kingdom of Gao.

Unfortunately, Sakura was killed on his way back from the pilgrimage. Since he was not a member of the royal family, the kingship passed on to two of Sunjata's descendants. Neither of them left any memories of important deeds.

After their reigns were over, the power passed to descendants of Sunjata's brother Manden Bori. Manden Bori's descendant, Mansa Musa, would prove to be one of the greatest rulers of the Mali Empire.

MANSA MUSA THE GREAT

Mansa Musa was famous for his piety (devotion to his religion) and generosity. His 25-year reign, from 1312 to 1337, is thought of as the golden age of Mali. Islamic scholar Ibn Kathir (ca. 1300–ca. 1374) reported that Mansa Musa was a young, handsome man who had 24 lesser kings under his authority.

Al-Umari was told that Musa had "conquered 24 cities, each with its surrounding district with villages and estates" (quoted by N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins in *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*), and that his palace was rich and splendid.

The royal flag that flew over Mansa Musa when he rode out on horseback was yellow with a red background. When the *mansa* officially met with people, he carried gold weapons, including a bow and arrows (symbols of royal power in Mali).

Mansa Musa sat on a large ebony throne that was on a raised platform with elephant tusks along the sides. Behind the king stood about 30 slaves, including ones from Turkey and Egypt. Over the *mansa's* head, one of the slaves held a large silk sunshade topped by a golden falcon.

The lesser kings sat in two rows on both sides, and beyond them were the commanders of the cavalry. In front of the *mansa* stood the sword bearer or chief executioner, and a chief spokesman called a *jeli*. The *mansa* never spoke aloud in public, but whispered what he wanted to say to the *jeli*, who would make the announcements.

Music accompanied his public appearances. There were different size drums, trumpets made of elephant tusks, and a kind of xylophone called the *bala* that is famous for its beautiful sound. There were always two horses (far more expensive than camels) tied nearby, ready for the *mansa* to ride whenever he needed them.

MANSA MUSA'S PILGRIMAGE

Of all the sub-Saharan West African rulers who made the pilgrimage to Mecca, Mansa Musa was the most famous. When he was preparing for the journey, he consulted his diviners to find out the best time to leave. The diviners told Mansa Musa he should wait until a Saturday that would fall on the 12th day of the month. This meant he had to wait nine months before he could leave—which he did.

The journey across the Sahara Desert took about a year and was extremely difficult. Thousands of people are said to have accompanied Mansa Musa. The king took along his senior wife, Inari Kanuté, who had hundreds of her own servants and slaves. There were also Muslims from among the Mali court officials and merchant community, soldiers to protect the caravan, camel drivers, servants, and slaves.

There were thousands of camels and donkeys to carry food, water, and other supplies. The caravan is said to have included 80 loads of gold dust. In addition to the animals, there were slaves to help carry the loads. When the caravan arrived in Egypt, the slaves were sold. Later, others were purchased for the return journey.

When Mansa Musa arrived in Egypt in July 1324, his huge caravan camped outside Cairo near the Great Pyramids. His visit to Egypt created a sensation because he carried such a huge amount of gold with him and was extremely generous in his gift giving. Among the gifts he sent to the sultan of Egypt were 40,000 dinars (gold coins). He also gave 10,000 dinars to the sultan's deputy, and was similarly generous to everyone at the Egyptian court.

When the visitors from Mali shopped in the Cairo market, the merchants took advantage of them and charged them five dinars for things that were only worth one. Mansa Musa distributed so much gold as gifts, and the Malians spent such large amounts in the market, that gold declined in value and did not recover for several years.

Mansa Musa stayed at Cairo for three months before he continued on to Arabia and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Such a journey could be extremely dangerous (Sakura was killed on the way home). This was true even for an emperor as rich and powerful as Mansa Musa who had a large armed guard and thousands of people with him.

Entire caravans had been known to lose their way and die in the great sandstorms of the Sahara. Some wells were several days' journey apart. In a dry year there might not be enough water for even a small caravan. Desperate travelers would sometimes kill their camels and drink the liquid out of their humps.

On Mansa Musa's journey, he and his caravan suffered great hardships crossing the Sahara. They narrowly escaped disaster returning to Cairo from Mecca. Sub-Saharan pilgrims were unfamiliar with the route from Egypt to Arabia, so the usual practice was for them to join an Arab caravan in Cairo and accompany it to Mecca. According to Ibn Khaldun, when Mansa Musa and his entourage were returning from Mecca to Cairo, they got separated from the main caravan. Without any Arab companions to show them the way, they were completely lost and could not find water.

They wandered until they finally came to the seashore at Suez (where the Suez Canal would be built more than five centuries later). They ate whatever fish they could find, and anyone who strayed from their main group was kidnapped by local Bedouin people (nomads who wandered the Arabian Peninsula) and taken as a slave. The survivors were finally rescued, but according to Muhammad al Husayni al-Maqrizi (1364–1442), an Egyptian historian and geographer, as many as a third of Mansa Musa's people and camels died.

The King Meets the Sultan

When Mansa Musa arrived in Egypt in July 1324, his huge caravan camped outside Cairo near the Great Pyramids. Distinguished visitors were expected to visit the sultan of Egypt. But Mansa Musa repeatedly refused to do so. He knew that everyone who met the sultan was required to kiss the ground in front of him. Mansa Musa was used to having people sprinkle dust on their heads when they came before him (an expression of humility and respect), so he was not prepared to kiss the ground for the sultan. He finally did meet the sultan and bowed as if praying, then declared that he would only get down on the ground "to God who created me" (quoted by Levtzion and Hopkins). The sultan welcomed Mansa Musa and presented him with expensive gifts.

CONNECTIONS

Timbuktu

Few places in the world have captured people's imaginations the way Timbuktu has. From the time people outside of Africa first heard of it, Timbuktu has seemed more like a mystical, timeless place than a city with a real history. No European ever saw it and returned to tell about it until the French explorer Réné Caillié (1799–1838) finally did in 1828.

The popular saying, "From here to Timbuktu," seems to place it at the very ends of the earth. But in fact, Timbuktu is a city in the modern Republic of Mali.

In the days of the Mali and Songhay Empires, Timbuktu was an important market city for the trans-Saharan trade and a center of Islamic scholarship. In the 17th century, when European merchant ships increasingly traded along the West African coast, the trans-Saharan trade routes began to lose their importance and Timbuktu gradually sank into economic decay. Nowadays, small camel caravans from salt mines 400 miles to the north still arrive in winter, but the great days of trans-Saharan trade have been gone for centuries.

The Sahara Desert, which once brought profitable commerce to Timbuktu, has now become a threat to the city's survival. Drifting sand blown by the dry seasonal wind called the *harmattan* threatens to smother some neighborhoods. The expansion of the desert has already destroyed vegetation and damaged the water supply and some buildings. As part of the effort to save this historical city, in 1990 Timbuktu was placed on the World Heritage List of Endangered Places, and a conservation program was established by UNESCO.

Early every morning in the streets of Timbuktu, Songhay women bake delicious loaves of bread in clay ovens.

More recently, Timbuktu has received an economic boost by becoming a tourist destination. Every winter during the Christmas and New Year holiday season, when daytime temperatures are comfortable and nights are chilly, tourists from all over the world come by plane and riverboat for overnight visits. They send out postcards boasting to their friends and relatives that they have been to Timbuktu. What is more important, they provide employment for the local people.

THE RETURN TO MALI

By the time Mansa Musa was ready to return to Mali, he had used up all his gold. To pay for his journey home, he had to borrow money at a very high rate of interest.

Like any traveler to foreign lands, Mansa Musa saw things he wanted to take home with him. In his case, there were also some people he wanted to take home. When he was in Mecca, he offered a thousand *mithqals* to any *shurafa* (direct descendants of Muhammad) who would go back to Mali with him. Four of them eventually agreed to go. They accompanied him with their families and settled permanently in Mali.

Mansa Musa also returned with an Arab architect (a person who designs buildings) from Spain named Abu Ishaq al-Sahili (ca. 1290–1346). The architect built Mansa Musa a rectangular house with a dome on top. The house was covered with plaster that was decorated with colorful designs. This marked the introduction of an architectural style that can still be seen in many towns and cities of the Western Sudan.

One of Mansa Musa's residences was in Timbuktu, and al-Sahili settled there. He is thought to have built the Jengereber Mosque in Timbuktu on the orders of Mansa Musa.

The Jengereber Mosque was built in Timbuktu in 1324–1327 by the Spanish architect Abu Ishaq al-Sahili who was commissioned by Mansa Musa.

COMMERCE BRINGS PROSPERITY

All the same goods that were traded in the regional markets of the Ghana Empire from the 10th to the 12th centuries were still traded in the markets of Mali from the 13th to the 15th centuries. The main difference was that at the height of Mali's power, it controlled far more territory than Ghana ever did. So it had even more to sell.

By the beginning of the 14th century, Mali's expansion into the

Inland Delta, Gao, and the eastern Songhay provinces added enormously to the farming, grazing, hunting, and fishing resources of the empire. The new territories also provided additional sources of slaves for trade, mili-

CONNECTIONS

Beautiful, Bloody Ivory

In the Mali Empire, ivory was one of the most profitable exports, along with gold, salt, and slaves. Throughout all the centuries of North African and European trade, untold numbers of elephants were killed for their ivory.

Between 1979 and 1989, when trading in ivory was still legal, records were kept of the slaughter. During those 10 years, so many elephants were killed for their ivory that the population of African elephants was cut from 1.3 million to approximately 600,000. The scale of poaching (illegal hunting) was so great that it harmed the economies of African countries that had to spend a great deal of money to fight poachers. During the ivory wars that were fought to stop the slaughter, many poachers and game wardens (people who enforce hunting regulations) were killed.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) tried to control the ivory trade. But they failed, and most of the ivory trade came from poached elephants. In 1989, CITES banned all international trade in elephants and their parts, including skins and ivory. This ban had wide support. It halted the devastation of populations and provided the opportunity for African elephants to begin a slow but promising recovery.

In 1997, things began going wrong again for the elephants. Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, which have some large elephant herds, requested that CITES lift its strict ban on the ivory trade. This would allow the export of elephant skins, tourist souvenirs made from ivory and skins, and live animals. Only Zimbabwe was allowed to export elephant skins.

In June 1998, Zimbabwe sold 22 lots of dry, salted elephant hides, ears, trunks, and feet. After the 1989 ban, poachers in Zimbabwe had not stopped killing elephants, so the hides had been accumulating. By 1997, they had a supply weighing 82.8 metric tons. Most of the hides were sold to companies in the United States and Japan. In the United States, elephant-hide cowboy boots are now offered by Tony Lama and Justin.

Sadly, the poaching and illegal trade in ivory continues to threaten the survival of elephants in Africa. Between January 2000 and July 2002, at least 1,063 African elephants were reported to have been poached for their ivory. During that time, customs officials and other authorities seized 54,828 ivory pieces, 3,099 ivory tusks (equal to 1,550 elephants), and 6.2 tons of raw ivory (equal to about 794 dead elephants).

Illegal ivory poaching is an ongoing problem in Africa, threatening the existence of elephants and rhinos. Here, a soldier in Kenya examines tusks seized after a 2003 raid.

tary service, and farm production. Tribute (a payment that a lesser ruler sent to a greater ruler) from kings and chiefs in Mali territory and taxes from newly controlled trade routes enriched the government treasury.

By the mid-14th century, when Mali was at its highest point of imperial dominance, the trans-Saharan trade had greatly increased. Because of Mansa Musa's fabulous pilgrimage and the resulting publicity in Cairo, Mali became better known in North Africa and the Middle East, and even in Europe.

Stories of Mali's wealth drew increasing numbers of North Africans to trading deals across the Sahara. In the decades following Mansa Musa's pilgrimage, Egyptian traders were regular visitors to Mali. The people who lived in Mali's commercial centers, such as Walata, were dressing in clothes imported from Egypt. Mansa Musa sent diplomats and opened an embassy in Morocco, which stimulated trade with the Maghrib (northwest Africa).

Ivory, slaves, salt, copper, and animal hides continued to be important in the trans-Saharan trade. But gold was the most important item. There were three principal goldfields below the Sahara. One of the main ones, which had also been a source for ancient Ghana, was at Bambuk,

between the Sénégal and Falémé Rivers. Another, also formerly controlled by Ghana, was at Buré north of the Upper Niger in what is now northeast Guinea. The third was in Akan territory near the forest in the modern republics of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

Mali drew on all three goldfields for the trans-Saharan trade in precious metal. Merchants from North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe competed for this Mali gold.

MANSA SULAYMAN

When Mansa Musa died in 1337, his son Mansa Magha became king. Mansa Magha ruled for only four years before he died. He was replaced by his uncle Sulayman, who was Mansa Musa's brother.

While Mansa Musa had been very popular with his subjects, Sulayman was intensely disliked. Nevertheless, he was a powerful and effective ruler of the empire. There is an unusually large amount of information about Mali during the reign of Mansa Sulayman (r. 1341–1360), because the Arab geographer Ibn Battuta visited there in 1352–1353 and later wrote about it.

It was customary for rulers of Western Sudan kingdoms to hold what were called *audiences,* during which ordinary citizens could submit complaints and legal disputes. Since these sessions were held in public, Ibn Battuta witnessed some. His descriptions show that the royal court of Mali was as rich and splendid as any in medieval Europe.

Ibn Battuta described the palace throne room as a "lofty pavilion" with curtained, gilded arches on one side. When the *mansa* was sitting in the pavilion, the curtains were raised and a signal flag on a silk cord was hung out a window as trumpets were blown and drums were beaten. On other days, the *mansa* held audiences under a giant tree, where the throne was on a raised platform with three steps leading up to it. Above the silk cushioned throne was a large silk sunshade topped by a golden falcon, similar to the one at Mansa Musa's court.

Whether in the palace or under the giant shade tree, the royal audiences were formal and grand. An honor guard of 300 soldiers lined up in ranks outside the palace gate, half armed with bows and arrows and half with lances (a weapon with a sharp, iron point mounted on a wooden pole). Two saddled horses and two rams were always present. The horses were kept ready for the king's use at any time, and the rams were believed to provide protection against witchcraft.

A Royal Wife in Trouble

Among the events Arab historian Ibn Battuta witnessed while in Mali was an attempt to get rid of the king. One of Mansa Sulayman's wives was involved. Rulers of the Mali Empire normally had many wives, but the first wife had special status. Kasa was Mansa Sulayman's first wife. She was also his cousin (the daughter of his uncle on his mother's side of the family). Ibn Battuta said she had the status of a queen and was Mansa Sulayman's "partner in rule," according to local custom (quoted by Levtzion and Hopkins).

According to Ibn Battuta, one day Mansa Sulayman had Kasa put in prison and replaced her with a wife named Banju, who was not from the royal family. Everyone at the court was upset, because Kasa was a popular aristocrat and nobody knew why she had been imprisoned. Before long, Kasa was released and was allowed to go out riding on her horse every morning, with her slaves to accompany her. But, because she had been pardoned for a crime, she had to stand near the *mansa's* throne with her face covered by a veil.

The events involving Kasa caused so much gossip among the people around the court that finally one day the *mansa* gathered them all together and had his chief *jeli*, Dugha, announce to them that Kasa had committed a serious crime. Then one of Kasa's slave girls was brought in. She was tied up and was ordered to tell her story. The slave girl said that Kasa had sent her to a cousin of Mansa Sulayman's named Jata, who had been sent away. Kasa's message was that her cousin should come back and remove the *mansa* from power. Her message, according to the slave girl, said, "I and all the army are at your service!" (quoted by Levtzion and Hopkins).

When the court officials heard this, they agreed that it was a great crime and said Kasa deserved to be executed. Kasa, who now feared for her life, left the palace and sought a safe place in the mosque.

When Ibn Battuta saw the *mansa* exit the palace gate to approach the outside throne, he was wearing a golden headdress and a red robe, and carrying a bow and arrows. Singers and musicians "with gold and silver stringed instruments" (quoted by Levtzion and Hopkins) walked in front of him. Once the *mansa* was seated, his deputies, councilors, and lesser kings were summoned. Each of the lesser kings had his own honor guard with lances, bows, and arrows. Marching ahead of them were drummers and trumpeters with elephant tusk horns.

THE TYRANT MARI JATA II

Mansa Sulayman died in 1360 after ruling for 24 years. His son Kanba took over the throne, but that same year, civil war broke out. Sulayman's sons and the sons of his brother Mansa Musa were fighting over who would be king.

Kanba died after only nine months in power. He was followed by Mari Jata II. He was the grandson of Mansa Musa and the son of Mansa Magha, who had died after only four years in power.

Mansa Magha had ruled the country for his father, Mansa Musa, while he was on pilgrimage. Then, when Mansa Musa died, Magha took over the power. But Mansa Musa's brother Sulayman was the next old-

CONNECTIONS

Sleeping Sickness

Sleeping sickness is spread by tsetse flies, which live only in Africa. They are slightly larger than horseflies and breed along rivers and streams. The flies live on blood, and can drink twice their weight in blood each time they feed. This poses a serious health risk to both animals and humans, because as they feed, the flies also transmit an infection of the central nervous system called trypanosomiasis.

Tsetse flies start by biting an animal or person who is infected with a tiny parasite called a trypanosome. The parasite lives inside the fly's stomach for several days. Then it travels to the fly's salivary glands, after which any person or animal who is bitten becomes infected. The disease is commonly known as sleeping sickness because, if left untreated, the victim falls into a coma and then dies.

It is estimated that today more than 66 million people living in rural areas of Africa are at risk from the bite of the tsetse fly. Each year an average of 25,000 new cases are identified, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Because this is a disease that strikes in rural areas, many sufferers are undiagnosed and untreated. Of the 36 countries in which sleeping sickness is a problem, 22 are actively involved in a WHO program to bring the disease under control. The most effective approach includes medical surveillance of the population that is at risk so treatment can begin early, control of the tsetse flies, and carefully monitored drug therapy.

By 2005, WHO reported that the number of new cases throughout the continent had fallen. Between 1998 and 2004, the number of cases reported for both animals and humans fell from 37,991 to 17,616. The estimated number of cases is currently between 50,000 and 70,000.

est, and had expected to step into power when Musa died. Since Musa's son Magha died after only four years in power, it has been suggested that Sulayman killed him.

Once in power, Mari Jata II proved to be a vicious tyrant (a ruler who uses his power in a cruel and unreasonable way). He caused much suffering among his subjects. Ibn Khaldun talked to a man who lived in Mali at the time, and was told that Mari Jata II ". . . ruined their empire, squandered their treasure, and all but demolished the edifice of their rule" (quoted by Levtzion and Hopkins).

One of the king's most notorious deeds was to sell a huge gold nugget at a cheap price to some Egyptian traders. The person Ibn Khaldun interviewed described it as a "boulder" that was regarded as Mali's most precious national treasure. After years of abusing his subjects and stealing from his country, Mari Jata II fell ill with sleeping sickness. Many Malians were probably relieved when he died two years later, in 1373.

POWER STRUGGLES END AN EMPIRE

Nobody knows the reason, but many of the descendants of Sunjata and his brother Manden Bori proved to be incompetent leaders. When Mari Jata II died in 1373, his son Musa was appointed the next king. Mansa Musa II (r. 1373–1387) was not at all like his father. He was a fair, wise, and considerate ruler, but he was too weak to maintain control of his kingship.

Musa II had a very strong and ambitious advisor who managed to take control of the government. Although the advisor's name was Mari Jata, he was not believed to have been a member of the royal family. To avoid confusion he is known as Mari Jata III.

Musa II was still the recognized *mansa*, but he was kept hidden and became a mere puppet of Mari Jata III. Jata took all the power into his own hands.

The Mali Empire had already been seriously weakened by the civil war that followed Mansa Sulayman's death and by the irresponsible reign of Mari Jata II. Even though Mari Jata III was not the recognized *mansa*, he worked hard to revitalize Mali's imperial power. He sent the army into the Sahara to fight the Tuareg for control of the salt and copper sources near Takadda. He also renewed or expanded Mali's control over the eastern frontier beyond Gao.

Another power struggle began when Mansa Musa II died in 1387. He was followed by his brother Mansa Magha II (r. 1387–1388), who was also weak. Once again, a member of the royal family was only a puppet ruler controlled by a powerful government official. Mansa Magha II was killed after only one year as king.

He was replaced by Sandaki, a member of the imperial council. Sandaki had married Mansa Musa II's mother, but he was not part of the ruling family and had no real right to be king. After only a few months in power, Sandaki was assassinated by a member of the royal

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

A Lion, a Madman, and a Powerful Slave

The Arab historian Ibn Khaldun never traveled across the Sahara Desert. But even in North Africa he heard reports about Sunjata (also known as Mari Jata), who founded the Mali Empire. He also wrote about other Mali rulers.

> *Their greatest king, he who overcame the Susu, conquered their country and seized the power from their hands, was named Mari Jata. Mari, in their language, means "ruler of the blood royal," and jata "lion." . . . He ruled for 25 years, according to what they relate. . . .*
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> *[The mansa called] Khalifa was insane and devoted to archery, and he used to shoot arrows at his people and kill them wantonly, so they rose against him and killed him. . . .*
>
> *[A later] ruler was a former slave who usurped their kingship. . . . His name was Sakura [and he] . . . performed the Pilgrimage during the reign of al-Malik al-Nasir [1309–1340] and was killed on the return journey at Tajura. During his mighty reign their dominions expanded and they overcame the neighboring peoples. He conquered the land of Kawkaw [Gao, later Songhay] and brought it within the rule of the people of Mali. Their rule reached from the Ocean and Ghana in the west to the land of Takrur in the east.*

Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis in 1332 and died in Cairo in 1406. He spent most of his life in service to North African rulers and had access to diplomatic exchanges between Morocco and Mali. He is considered a great historian because he recorded historical traditions from the Malians whom he met. He wrote down the names of the people he interviewed, and he was very careful to provide the most accurate information possible.

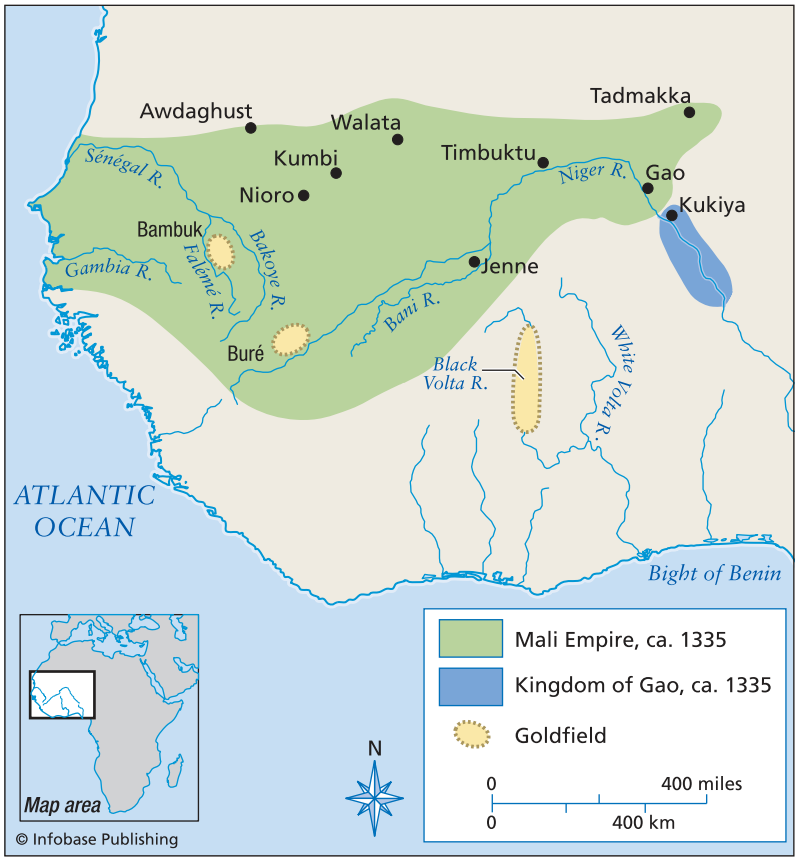
(Source: Levtzion, Nehemia, and J. F. P. Hopkins, editors. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981.)

family. Finally, in 1390, the throne of Mali was recaptured by Mahmud Keita, a descendant of Sunjata, the great hero.

Mahmud is the last of the Malian *mansas* mentioned by the Arab geographers. Others are mentioned in oral tradition but they are not associated with any dates, so there is no way to know how they fit into the historical picture.

By the end of the 14th century, generations of power struggles and weak leadership had undermined Mali's power. The time was approaching when it would be impossible to maintain control of the empire's distant frontiers. Mali lost control of Timbuktu around 1433. Beyond the Niger Bend, the more distant eastern provinces, including Gao, had probably been lost before that.

Some time around 1460, a king of Gao named Sulayman Dama attacked Mema, which had been one of Mali's provinces west of Timbuktu. After Sulayman Dama, the next ruler of Gao was Sii Ali Beeri (sometimes spelled Sunni Ali). He transformed that kingdom into an empire that would replace Mali as the great power of the Western Sudan.



Spreading from the Pacific Ocean in the west to the city of Gao in the east, the Mali Empire roughly followed the Sénégal and Niger Rivers. This map shows its approximate extent in 1335.

CHAPTER 3

THE SONGHAY EMPIRE

SONGHAY WAS THE THIRD OF THE GREAT EMPIRES IN THE medieval Western Sudan. The Songhay people came to dominate the eastern side of the Niger Bend. Eventually they developed an empire that covered a vast portion of the Western Sudan.

In ancient times, several different groups of people combined to form the Songhay. Among the first people in the region of Gao were the Sorko, who established small settlements on the banks of the Niger River. They were specialists in everything that had to do with the river. They built boats and canoes from the wood of the *caïlcédrat* tree. This is an evergreen tree with fine-grain wood that can grow to 90 feet tall. The Sorko fished and hunted from their boats, and provided water transportation for goods and people.

A second group that moved into the area to take advantage of the Niger's resources were hunters known as Gow. They specialized in killing river animals such as the crocodile and hippopotamus.

The other known group of the time was called Do (pronounced *Doh*). They were farmers who raised crops in the fertile lands that bordered the river.

Sometime before the 10th century, these early settlers were joined by more powerful horse-riding people who spoke the Songhay language. These horsemen established control over the other people in the area. All these people together gradually began to speak the same language. They and their country eventually came to be known as Songhay.

The dominant Songhay horsemen became recognized as masters of the eastern arc of the Niger Bend. The history of how this happened is not clear. Historians would not even know about the earliest dynasty of kings were it not for an ancient cemetery near a village called Saney, near Gao. Inscriptions on a few of the tombstones indicate that the

OPPOSITE
This monumental pyramidal tomb of mud-brick was built around 1495 in the Songhay capital of Gao, after Askia Muhammad returned from Mecca. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

dynasty ruled in the late 11th and early 12th centuries and that its kings had the title *malik*.

Other tombstones mention a second dynasty whose rulers had the title *zuwa*, but only myths and legends describe *zuwa* origins. The Arab chroniclers describe a mythical figure named Zuwa Alayman who is variously described as an Arab from Yemen, a giant from the bush who could run as fast as giraffes and ostriches, or the killer of a monster fish-god with a ring in its nose.

THE KINGDOM OF GAO

Among the early people of the Niger Bend region were the camel-riding Sanhaja of the Sahara Desert. They were known locally as Tuareg. They rode out of the great desert to establish trading camps near the Niger River. As time went on, North African traders crossed the Sahara Desert and joined the Tuareg in their Niger Bend settlements. They all did business with the people living near the river.

As the trade increased, the Songhay chiefs took control of the profitable commerce. They settled on the left bank of the Niger at a place that came to be known as Gao (which Arab geographers called Gawgaw).

Between 750 and 950, while the Ghana Empire was prospering as "the land of gold" far to the west, the trading center at Gao became an increasingly important southern end point for trade across the Sahara Desert. The trade goods included gold, salt, slaves, kola nuts, leather, dates, and ivory. By the 10th century, the Songhay chiefs had taken control of the peoples who lived along the trade routes. Gao was now a small kingdom.

By around 1300, Gao had become so prosperous that it attracted the attention of the Mali Empire's rulers and was conquered by them. Mali profited from Gao's trade and collected taxes from its kings until about the 1430s. But then troubles in the Mali homelands made it impossible for them to maintain control of the distant territories of the Niger Bend.

As Mali was becoming weaker, powerful new leadership was rising in Gao. It was about this time that the Zuwa dynasty was replaced by a new line of rulers who had the title of *sii* (short for *sonyi*).

In the 1430s, the Mali Empire withdrew from Timbuktu and Gao. The *sii* were then able to take complete control of their own kingdom.

Around 1460, Sii Sulayman Dama conquered Mema. This was a territory west of the Inland Delta that had been part of the Mali Empire for centuries. This showed that the Songhay would be able to take over some of the territories that were once on the fringes of Mali.

CONNECTIONS

Salt of the Sahara

Salt is essential to human life. In hot climates such as West Africa's, the body especially needs salt to replace what is lost through evaporation (sweat) and excretion (urine). People such as the nomadic herders of the savanna eat a diet based on meat and milk, which naturally contain salt. Therefore, they can survive without eating additional salt. But those who rely mostly on grains and vegetables, such as the farmers, must supplement their diet with added salt.

Traditional West African societies still live without refrigeration, as they have for thousands of years, so salt is also essential for drying and preserving fish and meat.

Salt production has been a major industry in the Sahara Desert at least since the 12th century. At Taghaza in modern Mali, about halfway between the Algerian and Mauritanian borders, salt is made by evaporating salt water in shallow pools called salt pans.

At Taoudenni, 500 miles north of Timbuktu, salt is mined from about 26 feet underground, where several hundred men hack solid salt blocks out of deposits in an ancient seabed. Once removed from the mine, the salt is cut into large slabs and loaded onto camels. The camel caravans are guided across the barren, empty desert by a single tracker who has a special ability to read the desert and locate the wells along the route. To miss his route by even a few miles can bring death, in a land where water is measured in drops and nothing grows for thousands of miles.

This camel is being loaded with huge salt slabs (two to a side) after an overnight stop in Araouane on his way from the salt mines of Taoudenni to Timbuktu.

Salt caravans have been known to include thousands of camels. The journey south across the desert to Timbuktu takes nearly two weeks. In Timbuktu, the salt is purchased by local merchants. They transport it down river to the large market town of Mopti. There the slabs are cut into smaller chunks and distributed to markets throughout West Africa.

SII ALI BEERI

When Sii Sulayman Dama died in 1464, Ali Beeri (r. 1464–1492) became the next *sii* of Gao and its surrounding lands. He was a very ambitious ruler. He was also a military leader with endless energy who was constantly on the move, leading his troops to hold off invaders and conquer new territory.

Sii Ali Beeri (*Beeri* means "the great" in Songhay) had a large, well-disciplined army that included cavalry. Whenever possible, Sii Ali also used a fleet of riverboats to transport his troops, with Sorko crewmen under a naval commander known as the Hi-koi. A river navy was very useful because many of Sii Ali's military campaigns were in territories bordering the Niger River.

Once Sii Ali had cleared the Gao kingdom of its most immediate dangers, he turned his attention to gaining control of the entire Middle

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Rough Trip, Big Disappointment

By speaking Arabic and pretending to be a Muslim traveling to Egypt, French explorer Réné Caillié became the first European to see Timbuktu and live to tell the tale. He started from the West African coast in April of 1827. After a miserable journey with months of illness and suffering, he arrived in Timbuktu on April 20, 1828. This excerpt reveals Caillé's mixed emotions when he first saw the fabled city.

> *At length, we arrived safely at Timbuctoo, just as the sun was touching the horizon. I now saw this capital of the Soudan, which had so long been the object of my wishes. On entering this mysterious city, which is an object of curiosity and research to the civilized nations of Europe, I experienced an indescribable satisfaction. I never before felt a similar emotion and my transport was extreme. . . . How many grateful thanksgivings did I pour forth for the protection which God had vouchsafed to me, amidst obstacles and danger which appeared insurmountable.*
>
> *This duty being ended, I looked around and found that the sight before me did not answer my expectations. I had formed a totally different idea of the grandeur and wealth of Timbuctoo. The city presented, at first view, nothing but a mass of ill-looking houses, built of earth. Nothing was to be seen in all directions but immense plains of quicksand of a yellowish white color. The sky was a pale red as far as the horizon: all nature wore a dreary aspect, and the most profound silence prevailed; not even the warbling of a bird was to be heard.*

Caillié only stayed two weeks in Timbuktu. If he did not leave when he

Niger. This included the rich gold and salt trade that passed through Timbuktu and Jenne.

TAKING TIMBUKTU AND JENNE

At the end of 1468, Sii Ali arrived with his Songhay army across the river from Timbuktu's port of Kabara. The richest and most powerful Muslims of Timbuktu (religious officials, scholars, and wealthy merchants) had been cooperating with the Tuareg people. They all wanted to keep control of the city out of Sii Ali's hands.

The Muslims were afraid that if Sii Ali succeeded, he would take revenge on those who had sided with his enemies. So they prepared a caravan of hundreds of camels for their escape. They fled to Walata, an important commercial city in the Sahara Desert. In January 1469, Sii

In 1828 Réné Caillié's host Sidi Abdallahi gave him free lodgings in this house. When the French explorer was not sightseeing in Timbuktu, he spent his time here secretly writing notes on what he saw.

did, it would be several months before the next camel caravan left. He was afraid if he stayed longer, his true identity as a French Christian would be discovered. He reached Tangier in September 1828, and hid in the French vice consul's house until he could board a French ship and return home.

Note that he refers to the region as "the Soudan." The region below the western Sahara is known in Arabic as Bilad al-Sudan ("land of the blacks"), and the French called it Soudan. In the colonial era, it became known as French Sudan. That area is now the Republic of Mali and parts of neighboring countries.

(Source: Caillié, Réné. *Travels Through Central Africa to Timbuktoo and Across the Great Desert to Morocco Performed in the Years 1824-1828*. London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentle, 1830.)

The original great mosque of Jenne in Mali probably dated from the 15th century. By the late 19th century it had fallen into ruin. The present mosque was rebuilt on those ruins in 1906–1907.

Ali entered Timbuktu. As many had feared, he allowed his troops to loot and burn the city and kill many people.

Sii Ali's victory over Timbuktu was a milestone in his career as a successful military leader. With that conquest, he took a major step in turning the small state of Gao into the Songhay Empire. After conquering Timbuktu, Sii Ali continued to wage campaigns along the Niger River. He relied heavily on both his cavalry and his river fleet.

The third most important city of the Niger bend was Jenne, which was roughly 200 miles southwest (upriver) of Timbuktu. Jenne was the key city in the Inland Niger Delta for several centuries, during the golden age of the Mali Empire and into the period of Songhay expansion. It is said to have been more famous than Timbuktu in medieval times, because of the great amounts of gold shipped from there to North Africa. Jenne enjoyed long periods of political independence.

Jenne was located in the floodplains between the Bani and Niger Rivers. The entire city, along with some of its farms and cattle herds, was encircled by a high wall. Adding to Jenne's security was the fact that for much of the year, when the Niger River was high, it was surrounded by water.

Taking advantage of a high water season, Sii Ali approached Jenne with his fleet of some 400 boats full of soldiers. But the city's defenders were courageous in their resistance, and Sii Ali's troops found it impossible to get past the city walls. Instead, they circled the city and settled in for a siege—a military tactic in which a city is sealed off so that people, goods, and supplies cannot enter or leave. The aim is to starve the city's inhabitants into surrender.

The exact dates of Sii Ali's attack on Jenne are not known, nor is it certain how long the siege lasted. According to legend, the siege was more than seven years, but this is probably an exaggeration. According to descriptions written in the 17th century, Sii Ali besieged Jenne for four years, which is probably closer to the truth. Eventually, the people of Jenne grew weak from famine and agreed to surrender to Sii Ali.

When they rode out to meet their conqueror, Sii Ali was astonished to see how young the chief of Jenne was. Sii Ali asked if he had been fighting a boy all those years. He was told the young man's father had died during the siege and the son had become ruler. Sii Ali married the boy's mother and sent her to Gao with rich gifts.

SII ALI'S LAST CAMPAIGNS

Sii Ali then set his sights on Walata, the city to which the Muslims fled when he attacked Timbuktu. Sii Ali depended on his riverboats so much that he wanted to use them for the campaign against Walata, even though it was far out in the Sahel where there were no natural waterways. So Sii Ali's laborers began digging a canal from the town of Ras-el-Ma at the western end of Lake Faguibiné. From there it was 120 miles more to Walata.

After Sii Ali's laborers began digging the canal, he heard that the Mossi ruler of the kingdom of Yatenga (in today's Burkina Faso) was on the way to attack him. Sii Ali abandoned the canal project, marched his army against the Mossi, and defeated them. He never did return to the canal project and the conquest of Walata.

Sii Ali won every battle he fought and conquered every territory he invaded. It is believed he was the only ruler ever to defeat the people of Jenne. The more territory he captured, the more he had to keep traveling to defend and administer his increasingly large empire. The newly conquered peoples frequently rebelled, and hostile neighbors constantly raided the territory now controlled by Songhay.

In 1492, after holding power for 28 years, Sii Ali died while returning home from another military campaign. He was followed by his son Sii Baru. Baru only ruled for five months before he was pushed out by a stronger leader.

ASKIA MUHAMMAD THE GREAT

One of Sii Ali's army commanders and provincial governors was Muhammad Touré. He was a very religious Muslim who had objected to Sii Ali's brutal treatment of the Muslims in Timbuktu. After Sii Ali died, Muhammad Touré challenged Sii Baru for the leadership of Songhay.

In 1493, after two fierce and bloody battles, Muhammad Touré removed Sii Baru and became king. *Askia* was a rank in the Songhay army with origins dating from at least the first half of the 13th century.

Muhammad Touré took this title as the name of his new dynasty. From that time on, all the kings of Songhay were known as *Askia*.

As one of the greatest of the Songhay rulers, Askia Muhammad (r. 1493–1529) strengthened and extended the empire that had begun to take shape under Sii Ali. He came to be known as Muhammad the Great, and created a professional full-time army and built up the Songhay cavalry. He expanded Songhay control far beyond the territories of the Middle Niger and the Inland Delta waterways that had been conquered by Sii Ali.

Under Askia Muhammad, the Songhay Empire established lands in which the kings paid tribute. These extended northward to the salt pans of Taghaza in the Sahara Desert, westward to many of the former territories of the Mali Empire, and eastward to the Tuareg kingdom of Agadez. The empire grew so large that its army was divided into two parts: one for the western provinces based in Timbuktu and one for the eastern provinces based in Gao.

This mud-brick minaret is in Agadez in the modern country of Niger. Agadez was twice conquered by Askia Muhammad of Songhay.

Two 17th-century Timbuktu chronicles (written accounts of historical events) name 37 sons that Askia Muhammad had with various wives and concubines (a concubine is a woman who is supported by a man and lives with him without being legally married to him). He might have had even more. The total number of his male and female children is said to have been 471. The sons were mostly half-brothers, related only through their father. These "rival brothers," as they were called, did not have the kind of close attachment to one another that might be felt by brothers who had the same mother (known as "milk brothers"). As these rival brothers grew up, they became involved in bloody power struggles.

When Askia Muhammad was about 70 years old, he found it difficult to control his sons. He was physically weak, and they pressured him to retire so one of them could become *Askia*. The royal court became a dangerous place for Askia Muhammad, even though the rebels were his own sons.

The oldest of the sons living in Gao was Musa. He was leader of the brothers who were trying to bring about a change in rulers. At this time, Ali Fulan, master of the Royal Household, would not

allow anyone to see the *Askia* in person. This further angered Musa. What the sons did not know was that Ali Fulan was hiding the fact that Askia Muhammad was blind.

Finally, in 1529 Musa publicly demanded that the power be given to him. The elderly and blind Askia Muhammad had no powerful supporters, so he gave in to his son and stepped down as king. Musa became the next *Askia* of Songhay, although his father lived another 10 years.

Once Musa became king, he started killing his rival brothers, one by one. Many fled to Walata, Timbuktu, and other towns. The killing continued for two years, until 1531. Then some of the surviving brothers joined together and killed Askia Musa in a bloody battle. The reign of Askia Musa lasted only two years and eight months.

After killing Askia Musa, the brothers returned to Gao. They expected their leader to be the next *Askia*. But when they got there, they found their cousin Muhammad Bonkana already sitting on the throne.

ASKIA MUHAMMAD BONKANA

Askia Muhammad Bonkana (r. 1531–1537) is remembered for decorating the Songhay court with splendid furnishings, introducing new kinds of musical instruments, and providing his courtiers with imported clothing.

He humiliated the daughters of the Askia Muhammad by forcing them to appear at court with their faces uncovered. According to their Muslim beliefs, this showed that the sisters were impure.

Askia Bonkana further insulted Askia Muhammad and all his sons by having the court storyteller continually repeat, "A single ostrich chick is better than a hundred hen chicks." Everyone knew this meant, "The son of Umar Komadiakha [Bonkana's father] is worth more than a hundred sons of Askia Muhammad" (quoted by John Hunwick in *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire).*

When Askia Bonkana took power, Askia Muhammad was still living in the royal palace. But Askia Bonkana sent him to be imprisoned on a mosquito-infested island in the Niger River, near the city.

Askia Bonkana had been friends with Ismail, one of Askia Muhammad's sons, since childhood. Ismail had fled when Musa started killing all his brothers. Now Askia Bonkana wanted this cousin to join him in Gao. However, because Ismail actually had a stronger claim to the throne, Askia Bonkana was concerned for his own safety. So when Ismail arrived, the king had him swear on the Quran that Ismail would

never betray him. As an extra precaution, Askia Bonkana had his daughter Fati marry Ismail, so his cousin was now also his son-in-law.

One night Ismail went to visit his father where he was imprisoned. The blind man took hold of his son's arm and asked him why, with such strong arms, he was leaving his father to be eaten by mosquitoes and croaked at by frogs. Ismail replied that he had no power to do anything. But his father convinced him to contact powerful allies who would help. In 1537, while Askia Bonkana was away on a military campaign, Ismail overthrew him.

Askia Ismail released his father from the island and brought him back to the palace. In gratitude, Muhammad presented Askia Ismail with the ceremonial clothing that went with the high Muslim office of caliph (religious leader): a green robe, green cap, white turban, and the Arabian sword that Muhammad had been given on pilgrimage to Mecca when he was *Askia*. Muhammad lived into his 90s and died in 1538, during Askia Ismail's reign. Askia Ismail reigned for two years and nine months, and died a natural death in November 1539.

FROM ANXIETY TO PROSPERITY

When the leading men of Songhay heard about Askia Ismail's death, they peacefully agreed that the next *Askia* would be Ishaq (r. 1539–1549), another son of Muhammad the Great.

Of all the *Askias*, it was Askia Ishaq who inspired the most fear and anxiety among the Songhay people. Despite being a devoted Muslim, Askia Ishaq regularly sent agents to Timbuktu to demand large sums of money from the merchants. (Islam prohibits bribery and demands for money.) Fearing for their lives, nobody dared complain.

The amount of money demanded was so great that it damaged the economic prosperity of the Songhay Empire and gained Askia Ishaq many enemies. He began to fear that he would be overthrown. Anyone who was suspected of opposing him was quickly dismissed or killed.

In 1549, when it became known that Askia Ishaq was dying, his brother Daud went to visit a Songhay sorcerer (called a *sohanci*). Some people believe the *sohanci* worked a magic spell that eliminated Daud's chief rival. Whether or not this is true, Daud became the next *Askia*.

Together with Sii Ali Beeri and Askia Muhammad, Askia Daud (r. 1549–1582) is remembered as the third of the Songhay Empire's greatest rulers. The empire remained stable and prosperous under his rule.

Up to this time, all of the *Askias* had been sons of Muhammad—with the exception of Muhammad Bonkana, who was a nephew. Many

other sons of Askia Muhammad had held high offices and titles. During the 34-year reign of Askia Daud, as these important offices became vacant, he usually appointed his own sons to the positions. In this way, Askia Daud gradually eliminated from high office the descendants of other sons of Askia Muhammad. From Askia Daud's time forward, all the *Askias* were his descendants.

Nevertheless, after his death in 1582, warfare broke out among the brothers competing for power. The winner was Askia Muhammad al-Hajj (r. 1582–1586). He is notably different from the other Songhay rulers because he never organized a military campaign. Soon after he took power, he developed a painful medical condition on the lower part of his body that kept him from leading his troops.

He also never killed any of his brothers. But after nearly four and a half years, they became impatient with his poor health. In 1586, Askia al-Hajj was replaced by his brother Muhammad Bani. Al-Hajj died soon after.

ASKIA MUHAMMAD BANI

When Muhammad Bani (r. 1586–1588) became *Askia*, one of his brothers complained that the most foolish of their father's sons had become ruler. This brother, and several others who had agreed with him, were killed by Muhammad Bani as soon as he was in power.

During Askia Bani's reign, the town of Kabara was the scene of events that lead to a civil war. This war eventually spelled disaster for the Songhay Empire. Kabara is Timbuktu's port on the Niger River. Two of the most powerful men in Songhay lived there. One was Alu, the chief of the port, and the other was Muhammad Sadiq, the military commander.

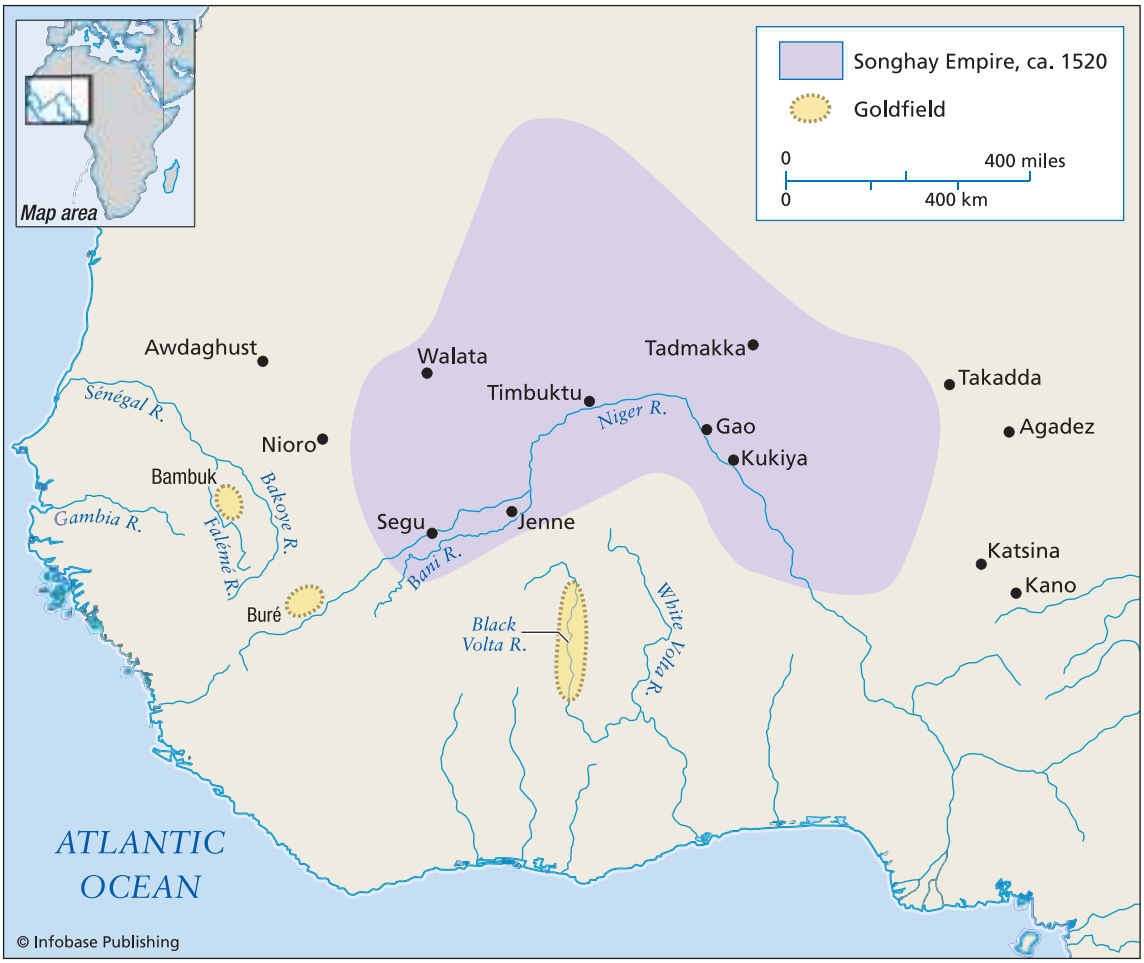
Sadiq was a son of Askia Daud and was popular with the leading men of Timbuktu. Alu was an officer in the service of Askia Bani. The Timbuktu historian Ibn al-Mukhtar (17th century) describes Alu as "an oppressor . . . and a stubborn tyrant" (quoted in Hunwick). In 1588, Alu whipped and jailed one of Sadiq's men. Sadiq responded by killing Alu.

Sadiq took all of Alu's property and declared a revolt against Askia Bani. Accompanied by other Songhay commanders, Sadiq began to march the army toward Gao. The Songhay historian Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi (b.1594), in his *Tarikh al-Sudan* (History of Sudan), wrote that when the *Askia* heard they were coming, he said, "May God curse kingship, for it is a source of humiliation and degradation" (quoted in Hunwick).

Askia Daud's Accomplishments

Askia Daud reigned for more than 30 years. During that time, he reorganized the Songhay army and won victories over Tuareg raiders of the Sahara and many neighboring non-Muslim peoples to the south. Daud also fought off invaders from all directions who tried to capture the rich resources of the Inland Niger Delta. He succeeded in most of his military campaigns, although a struggle with the Moroccan sultan Muhammad al-Shaykh caused the temporary loss of the salt mines at Taghaza in 1557.

Askia Daud was widely praised for memorizing the Quran and for supporting learning and religion. As part of this support, he is said to have established public libraries in his kingdom.



By 1520, the Songhay Empire had extended so far northward that its control of the rich salt mines of the Sahara was envied by Morocco. Songhay's power was anchored by the three greatest cities of the medieval savanna: its capital Gao; Timbuktu, which was the center of learning and salt trade; and Jenne, the main shipping point of gold from the south.

Askia Bani set out from Gao with his army to battle with Sadiq, and stopped at midday to take a nap. The *Askia* was overweight and was wearing a cloak made of chain mail (armor made of closely linked metal wire) during the hottest part of the day. When his servants came to wake him to get ready for the midday prayer, they found him dead of a heart attack.

ASKIA ISHAQ II

The next descendant of Askia Daud to take the throne was Ishaq. He became known as Askia Ishaq II (r. 1588–1591). His immediate problem was that the people of Timbuktu were still loyal to Sadiq. With Askia Bani now dead, Sadiq wanted to overthrow the new *Askia* and

grab power for himself. Sadiq's army swore loyalty to him, and were therefore in revolt against Askia Ishaq II.

Sadiq was so popular with the people of Timbuktu that they held a celebration in his honor that included beating drums on the rooftops. When Askia Ishaq II learned what was happening, the armies of Timbuktu and Gao met in battle. Sadiq was defeated, and he and all of the Songhay officers who had joined in his rebellion were captured and put to death. There were so many executions that Songhay lost many of its finest military commanders. Hundreds of soldiers on both sides had also been killed in the battle.

Askia Ishaq II appointed new commanders, but he could not replace the dead troops. Sadiq's rebellion had caused the loss of a large portion of the Songhay army.

At the end of 1590, Askia Ishaq II received news that an army from Morocco was on its way to attack Songhay. He assembled his newly appointed commanders to discuss plans for their defense against the Moroccan threat. But they could not agree on a strategy, and so Songhay was not prepared to meet the approaching invaders.

THE MOROCCAN INVASION

Al-Sadi and Ibn al-Mukhtar, two 17th-century Timbuktu historians, tell a story that may or may not be true about an incident leading to the Moroccan invasion of Songhay. It is claimed that some time in 1589, a slave born in the Songhay royal house named Wuld Kirinfil was imprisoned at Taghaza, in the Sahara. The slave escaped and fled to Marrakesh (in Morocco), where he claimed to be a brother of Askia Ishaq II.

Wuld Kirinfil supposedly wrote a letter to the Moroccan sultan, Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur (r. 1578–1603), encouraging him to invade Songhay. Al-Mansur wrote to Askia Ishaq II demanding, among other things, payment of one *mithqal* (a measured unit of gold) as a tax on every camel-load of salt to leave the mines of Taghaza. These salt mines were in disputed territory halfway between Songhay and Morocco.

Askia Ishaq II sent an insulting reply, accompanied by a spear and a pair of iron sandals. The sandals meant that until the day al-Mansur wore out those sandals, Askia Ishaq II would never agree to his demands. The idea was that since the sandals were made of iron, they would never be worn out.

Even before the escaped slave had contacted al-Mansur, the sultan was aware that Songhay could be a source of gold, slaves, and other riches

because he had a spy living in Gao for several years. Al-Mansur used Askia Ishaq II's challenge as an excuse to send an expedition to attack Songhay.

Timbuktu Chronicles and Tombstones

During the 16th century when the Songhay Empire was at the height of its power, Timbuktu was a great center of learning. There were many schools teaching the Quran and authors writing books in Arabic. After Songhay was conquered in 1591, Timbuktu and other cities were administered by Moroccan officials called *arma*.

In Timbuktu there were Muslim scholars of Soninke descent who wanted to defy their conquerors by recalling the glories of the Songhay Empire. Their writings are still among the most important sources for the history of Songhay.

Two 17th-century Timbuktu historians who traced their own ancestors to the Ghana Empire described the various government offices in the Songhay Empire, named some of the important men who held them, and described some of their deeds. They were Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi (b. 1594), who wrote *Tarikh al-Sudan* (Chronicle of the Sudan) in about 1656, and Ag Mohammed Ibn al-Mukhtar, who wrote *Tarikh al-fattash* (Chronicle of the Searcher) around 1665.

When studying these chronicles, however, it is important to remember that the authors relied on oral tradition for a lot of their information, and that they were reconstructing Songhay history in defiance of Moroccan rule.

Another important source of information about Muslim ruling dynasties and other Muslims of Songhay is a large collection of inscriptions, mostly in Arabic, written on tombstones. Several cemeteries have been found in the ancient cities of the old Songhay territories. The earliest of the tombstones dates from about 1013. It is from a site called Essuk, which was in the medieval commercial town of Tadmakka, north of Gao in the Sahara Desert.

The cemetery near the village of Saney, which is about five miles from Gao, contains royal tombstones from around the beginning of the 12th century. Some of the Saney tombstones are made of Spanish marble. One of them marked the grave of Abu Abdullah Muhammad, who died in 1100. In Arabic, the name *Abdullah* means "slave of God," signifying someone who is a devout Muslim. So, from the tombstones we know that by this time the kings and dignitaries of the land were devoted Muslims, that their trade network extended all the way to Spain, and that they were wealthy enough to import expensive Spanish marble.

Al-Mansur chose as his commander Jawdar Pasha (*pasha* is a word that denotes high rank or office). Jawdar was an Islamic convert of Spanish origin. The Moroccan army set out at the end of 1590 with about 4,000 fighting men, including some 2,000 foot soldiers with muskets (a type of light gun with a long barrel), 500 musketeers riding horses, 1,500 Arab spearmen, and 70 Christian slaves armed with arquebuses (an early portable big gun). Some of the Moroccan troops probably wore chain mail armor, which was introduced to the Western Sudan about the same time as firearms.

It took about 10,000 camels to carry all the invading army's supplies. These included four small canons and 10 mortars for shooting stone balls into towns. They also had to carry large quantities of gunpowder, tents, and other supplies for the troops, and enough food and water to last them for a journey of at least 40 days across the Sahara Desert.

When the Songhay heard the Moroccans were coming, one of the *Askia's* commanders suggested they send soldiers to fill in the desert wells to deprive the invaders of water. Instead, Askia Ishaq II sent messengers to ask Tuareg chiefs to fill in the wells. Not only did the Tuareg lack any loyalty to Songhay, but the messengers could not even get through because they were attacked by bandits. Jawdar Pasha's troops found the wounded messengers in the desert still carrying the *Askia's* message.

The Songhay leadership failed to act quickly. The Moroccans crossed the Sahara and then took two weeks to recover from their exhausting desert journey. The decisive battle took place on March 12, 1591, near Tondibi, which is 30 miles north of Gao on the Niger River. The Songhay suffered heavy losses and retreated across the Niger River. They were shielded by courageous troops who protected their rear and fought to the death.

Askia Ishaq II then tried to buy off the Moroccan invaders. He offered Jawdar Pasha a tribute of 100,000 gold pieces and 1,000 slaves, hoping this would satisfy the Moroccans and that they would leave Songhay. By this time the Moroccan troops were exhausted and ill. Jawdar Pasha was prepared to accept the tribute and retreat back across the desert.

However, back in Marrakesh, al-Mansur decided he wanted to retain control of the newly conquered land below the desert. He rejected Askia Ishaq II's offer and replaced Jawdar with Mahmud Pasha. Mahmud had instructions to complete the conquest of Songhay. The Moroccans occupied and looted Timbuktu, Gao, and Jenne. They sent the wealth of these cities back to their capital of Marrakesh, where it was used to build fine palaces.

The *Mithqal*

In Damascus, Syria, at the end of the seventh century, the Islamic world began to mint its own coins. In some parts of the Middle East, units of money, then as now, were referred to as dinars. When gold coins were first minted in West Africa, their value was based on the Syrian gold dinar, and the coin became known as a *mithqal*.

One authority gives the official weight of the *mithqal* in 17th-century Syria as 4.25 grams. But the actual weight of the *mithqal* varied greatly in different times and places. In West Africa during the Songhay Empire, for example, a *mithqal* could be worth the weight of 1,000 cowrie shells in one place, and in another place it could be valued according to the weight of 24 seeds of the carob tree. In later centuries, a *mithqal* signified various fractions of ounces. Therefore, the best way to describe the *mithqal* in early West Africa is a small but valuable measure of gold in the form of dust, nuggets, or coins.

Moroccan Firearms

The arquebus was invented in the mid-15th century. It used a serpentine or S-shaped piece of metal with a central pivot attached to the side of the gun. The upper part of the serpentine held a burning piece of hemp or cotton rope soaked in a chemical called saltpeter that burned easily. By pulling on the bottom half of the serpentine, the upper part holding this burning "match" was lowered into a pan containing a charge of powder that fired the gun.

More advanced muskets that were also carried by the Moroccan army began to appear in Spain during the early part of the 16th century. The musket was considered the largest and most powerful gun an individual soldier could use. Most were 5 to 6 feet long, weighed around 20 pounds, and required a forked rest to support the gun during firing. The simple serpentine of the arquebus was replaced with the more advanced spring-operated trigger to lower the "match" into the pan.

Before the Moroccan invasion of Songhay, there were very few, if any firearms in that part of Africa south of the Sahara. In 1591, the soldiers of Songhay had never seen the arquebus or musket. Just the noise they made gave the Moroccans a big advantage.

What remained of the Songhay army retreated into the countryside. They rebelled against Askia Ishaq II and placed Muhammad Gao on the throne. But Askia Muhammad Gao unwisely accepted an invitation to visit Mahmud Pasha—and was assassinated.

Lead by Askia Nuh, a brother of Muhammad Gao, the Songhay continued their resistance to the Moroccan occupation. For two years they fought small but successful ambushes against Mahmud Pasha and his troops, until Mahmud finally gave up and returned to Timbuktu. Nuh fought on until 1599, but the Moroccans continued to occupy Timbuktu and other urban centers. The Songhay leaders were never able to recover their empire.

The great cities of the former Songhay Empire were under Moroccan control. It did not take long for the peoples who had been conquered by the Songhay to assert their independence and begin raiding one another.

In the early 17th century, Tuareg nomads of the Sahara began making raids into the great bend of the Niger River. The cattle-herding Fula of the Inland Delta formed their own state, called Masina, and began attacking their neighbors. Bamana warriors from up river (southwest of Songhay) laid siege to Jenne and fought with the Fula. Armies from kingdoms in present-day northern Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso also began advancing into southern regions of the former empire. By the 18th century, the former heartland of the Songhay Empire was occupied by several small states.

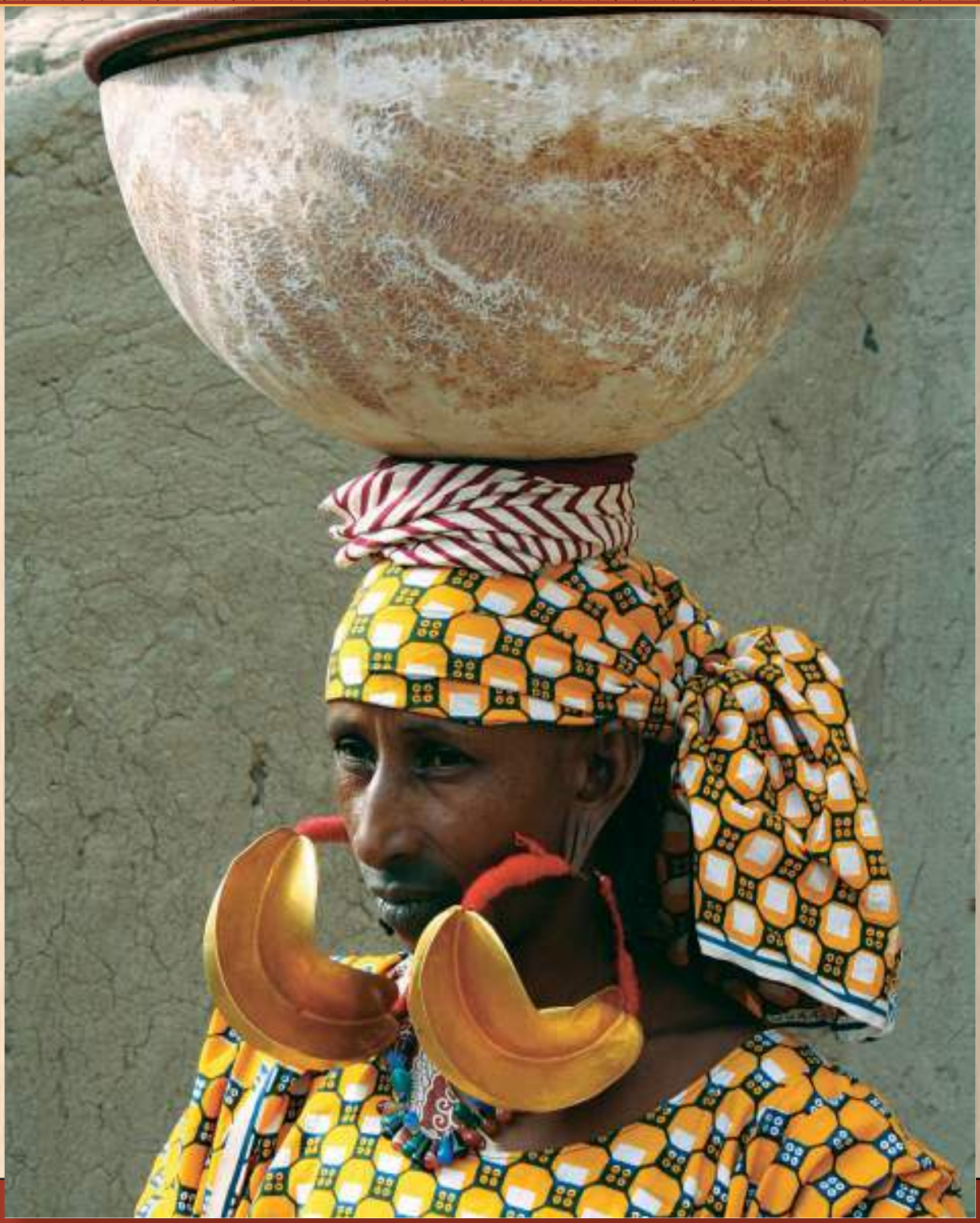
PART · II

Society and Culture

The Soninke People of the Ghana Empire

The Mande People of the Mali Empire

The Songhay People



CHAPTER 4

The Soninke People of the Ghana Empire

THE SONINKE WERE ONE OF THE FIRST COMMUNITIES THAT Muslim merchants traded with when they crossed the Sahara Desert and arrived in the Sahel. The Soninke called their kingdom Wagadu, but the Arab geographers who wrote about it called it Ghana.

In 1067 and 1068, during the period of the Ghana Empire's greatest power and prosperity, the Arab scholar al-Bakri wrote a description of the Western Sudan that included a surprising number of details about the empire and its capital city. Of all the Arab geographers whose works have been translated into English by N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins in *Corpus of Arabic Sources for West African History*, al-Bakri provides the most information about Ghana. He lived in Córdoba, Spain, and never visited Africa himself, so he had to interview traders who had crossed the Sahara. Al-Bakri also based his writings on earlier written sources, including a geographical work by Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Warraq (904–973).

Since he never saw the place he was writing about, it is understandable that he got some facts confused. For example, al-Bakri is one of the Arab geographers who thought the capital city and its word for king were both Ghana. He also reported that the king of Ghana at the time he was writing was named Tunka Manin, who took the throne in 1063. The Arab geographers apparently did not know that *tunka* was a title for Ghana's rulers (*maghan* was another, which might be the origin of the term *Ghana*).

Al-Bakri tells a story about Basi, Tunka Manin's uncle, that is similar to the story of Dinga in the Legend of Wagadu. Basi was the king of Ghana before Tunka Manin. According to the story, Basi had become

OPPOSITE

This woman of the cattle-herding Fula people, who were among the populations of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, is wearing earrings of pure gold from the ancient mines of Mali.

A Travel Writer Who Stayed Home

The Arab scholar al-Bakri was born in Spain early in the 11th century and died there in 1094. He never visited Africa, and most likely never even left Spain during his lifetime. Nevertheless, he is one of the most important sources for early West African history below the Sahara, including most of what is known about the Ghana Empire. Al-Bakri got his information from books written by Arab geographers whose works are now lost. He also interviewed many people who had traveled across the Sahara.

ruler at the age of 85. Toward the end of Basi's life he became blind, but this was kept a secret from his subjects. When Basi had to meet the public, he was able to fool people with the help of his ministers, who would whisper or otherwise verbally signal to him what he was supposed to do and say.

It is significant that the king before Tunka Manin was his uncle rather than his father. This is evidence of a matrilineal line of descent, in which the king's successor is the son of his sister. This was done because the ruling family and government could always be sure who a boy's mother was. But a boy's father could never be established for certain.

ANIMALS AND PLANTS

Hunting was important to the Soninke people, but details about how they did it are sketchy because the Arab geographers had only a vague knowledge of the animals below the Sahara. Al-Bakri mentioned "the animal from whose hides shields are made" (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins), but he did not know what it was. He did not recognize the hippopotamus, but heard about an animal that grazed on land, lived in the water, and resembled an elephant "in the great size of its body as well as its snout and tusks" (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins).

In medieval Ghana, the hippo was hunted with a javelin (a light spear that was thrown) that had rings in its handle and ropes that ran through the rings. The hunters would throw several javelins at a hippo in the water. When it died and floated to the surface, they used the ropes to drag it to shore. One product made from the thick hippo hide was a vicious kind of whip that was exported for sale in distant markets.

Many different kinds of trees grew in the savanna. One of these was ebony, which produces beautiful and valuable black hardwood—although it was used for firewood by the local populations.

One of the most useful trees was the baobab, which the Arab writers agreed was a very strange one. They had some fantastic (and false) notions, believing the baobab produced wool from which fireproof garments were made. Other aspects of the baobab must have seemed just as strange, but happened to be true. Ibn Battuta, who actually traveled through the Western Sudan from 1352 to 1353, correctly reported that even without leaves, the trunks are so big around that they can provide

CONNECTIONS

The Amazing Baobab Tree

The baobab is one of the biggest and strangest trees in the world, and one of the oldest living things in Africa. Some trees are more than 3,000 years old, and the largest measure more than 90 feet around.

The baobab has been called the upside-down tree because when its branches are bare of leaves they look like roots sticking up in the air. It has also been called the bottle tree because the thick, absorbent trunk can store hundreds of gallons of water.

The baobab is sacred to at least one clan in the Western Sudan; it is credited with saving the life of an ancestor who was dying of thirst before he reached one of the great trees. The baobab can continue to live when much of it has been hollowed out, and at various times and places hollow ones have been used as people's homes, storehouses, workshops, and tombs.

African village women still gather baobab leaves to mash and boil for use in cooking sauces. For medicinal purposes, baobab leaves are pounded and pulped, or dried and powdered, to treat a variety of problems, including breathing and intestinal disorders, fever, and insect bites. When the bark is stripped off a baobab, it simply grows more bark, so it can be used without killing the tree. The bark is pounded into fiber that is used for making baskets, mats, rope, paper, and bark cloth.

The fruit of the baobab is a large, fuzzy pod that looks like a small green football. It is called monkey bread because it is a favorite food of monkeys, among other animals. There is a white pulp inside the pods from which cream of tartar (used in baking) is made. The pulp is also mashed and mixed with water to make a tasty drink. The seeds are full of vegetable oil and can be grilled and eaten. The shells of the pods are dried and made into bowls.

Baobab trees provide food, medicine, and shelter.

shade to many people. He saw one with a hollow trunk that was used as a weaver's studio.

THE CITY PLAN OF GHANA'S CAPITAL

There is a good deal of confusion and doubt in identifying the ruins of Ghana's capital. In the Soninke oral tradition, the city associated with the hero Diabi Cissé and the guardian serpent Bida is called "Kumbi." The Arab geographer al-Bakri does not mention the name Kumbi. He and other Arab writers call both the city and its king "Ghana," and the region "Awkar."

Al-Bakri said the capital had wells with good drinking water and water for cultivating vegetables. The travelers he spoke to led him to believe that the city was made up of two towns: a Muslim town and the king's town. Before sub-Saharan populations became almost entirely Muslim, it was not unusual for Muslims to have their own neighborhood with their mosques, special food shops, and other necessities. It is surprising, though, that al-Bakri claims the two towns were six miles apart. None of the ruins throughout the Sahel have revealed an urban center that had separate towns six miles apart.

Looking for a likely place to dig for the capital, archaeologists chose a place still known to local Soninke people as Kumbi Saleh. It is about 20 miles north of the border that southern Mauritania shares with western Mali. This site revealed an urban center that had two sections—although they were not six miles apart. There are also other ways in which al-Bakri's description is not the same as what archaeologists found at Kumbi Saleh.

Some archaeologists and other scholars believe this site is the "Kumbi" of Soninke oral tradition and the capital described by al-Bakri. But others are not so sure. An intensive search around the stone ruins of the site has failed to clearly reveal either the royal quarter or the kings' tombs that al-Bakri described. There is no river anywhere near the site, even though some scholars argue that Ghana's capital was near water because the Arab geographer al-Idrisi (1099–1166) said the city of Ghana consisted of two towns on opposite banks of a river.

The ruins known today as Kumbi Saleh reveal that it was a large town that covered about one square mile. Some of its features do resemble al-Bakri's description. Al-Bakri said the houses were made of stone and acacia wood, and that is what archaeologists have found in

the ruins of rectangular buildings in Kumbi Saleh. The larger buildings of stone include mosques and the residences of wealthy Arab traders.

In the ruins called Kumbi Saleh, the northeastern part of the town was built of stone and had large buildings, some of them two stories high. This appears to have been the neighborhood occupied by wealthy merchants from North Africa. In the southern section of the town there are some stone buildings, but the evidence indicates that most were made of mud brick (called *banco*, it is similar to adobe in the

What Happened to Bida?

What about the sacred serpent Bida, from the Legend of Wagadu? Somewhere in the land of the Soninke during the time al-Bakri was writing, they still had shrines with live snakes. Al-Bakri heard about a snake shrine of people he calls Zafqu, who were probably the people of Dia (the Diafunu). They lived some distance from Ghana's capital city, but were probably Soninke. According to what al-Bakri heard, the snake was "a monstrous serpent with a mane and a tail and a head shaped like that of the Bactrian camel" (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins). The snake he described is partly the product of some traveler's wild imagination, but the general ritual at the cave is clearly similar to the one described in the Legend of Wagadu.

The snake lived in a cave, and just outside it lived the priests who handled its feeding and supervised the rituals and ceremonies. Al-Bakri wrote (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins):

> *When one of their rulers dies they assemble all those whom they regard as worthy of kingship, bring them near the cave, and pronounce known formulas. Then the snake approaches them and smells one man after another until it prods one with its nose. As soon as it has done this it turns away towards the cave. The one prodded follows as fast as he can and pulls from its tail or its mane as many hairs as he is able. His kingship will last as many years as he has hairs, one hair per year.*

Obviously, some of the Arab geographers were prepared to believe anything they heard about the strange things to be found in the land below the Sahara. One would think that even writing from far away in Spain, al-Bakri would know that snakes do not have hair. Nevertheless, this story indicates that hundreds of years after the founding of Wagadu, great pythons like Bida were still important religious symbols of Soninke society. It also makes it clear that many populations of the Western Sudan had still not converted to Islam.

Short Roof Beams

The buildings of Kumbi Saleh have a special architectural feature that is not seen in parts of the world where there are tall trees. In medieval times in the Sahel region, the acacia trees used for roof beams were not long enough or sturdy enough to go across wide spaces. To build a roof with short beams, wide stone pillars were built up from the ground and spaced about eight to 12 feet apart. Then the acacia logs were laid from the tops of the walls to the pillars, and the upper floor could be laid on these.

This kind of architecture is found in all the ruined cities of the region, including Kumbi Saleh, Awdaghust (now called Tegdaoust), Walata (a great trading city), Tidjikja (where copper was mined in the Sahara), and others that flourished during the Ghana Empire.

American southwest). This part of the ruin comes the closest to looking something like the king's town described by al-Bakri.

In the central neighborhoods of the town, the houses were built close together with narrow streets. There were also open spaces with large sunken areas that were created when earth was dug out to make mud bricks for construction. These low areas filled up during the rainy season. Although the water was not good to drink, it was convenient for watering livestock and market gardens, and for doing laundry. After the rainy season, these temporary ponds gradually dried up.

Maps made by archaeologists show one main avenue running from east to west through the center of Kumbi Saleh. On both sides of the avenue were open spaces, probably for market stalls that would have been busy with regional trade when Ghana was at its most prosperous.

At its widest point, the avenue spanned 39 feet. This was at the center of the southern part of the town, in front of what appears to have been the main mosque. The archaeologists found that the mosque itself was about 150 feet from west to east, and about 75 feet from north to south.

The western half of the mosque appears to have been an open paved courtyard, which is the usual design of mosques in the Sahel and Western Sudan. At Friday prayers, when the building filled up with worshippers, the courtyard would handle the people who could not fit inside. Unfortunately, there is no way to know if this is actually the mosque al-Bakri described as the one built for Muslims who visited the king's court. In fact, archaeologists cannot even be certain that Kumbi Saleh is the town he described.

Kumbi Saleh had at least two large cemeteries. Archaeologists have used them to estimate the city's population. They think the town had 15,000 to 20,000 inhabitants. There were 53 stones in the cemeteries that were inscribed with verses from the Quran in Arabic, and 24 other stones inscribed with ornamental decorations.

When the archaeologists excavated in the cemeteries, they found iron objects including knives, spearheads, nails, farming tools, and a pair of scissors. They also discovered some tiny glass weights of the type used for weighing gold. There were many fragments of pottery as well, including some that came from the Mediterranean coast. All of this archaeological evidence suggests that Kumbi Saleh was once a prosperous commercial center. But it does not prove it is the "Kumbi" mentioned in Soninke oral tradition or the town described by al-Bakri.

THE KING'S PALACE

The king's palace described by al-Bakri was similar to royal residences that still exist in sub-Saharan West Africa. These are not large, single buildings with hundreds of rooms, like some grand palaces in Europe. al-Bakri said the king had a palace and a number of dwellings with domes on top. They were surrounded with an enclosure, like a city wall. But actually, the entire collection of buildings within the wall, including the king's private residence, would have been considered "the palace."

The biggest and most impressive building was for the king. He was the head of a very large family with many wives and concubines, scores of children, and dozens of relatives. Some buildings would be for individual wives, each with her children, relatives, servants, and slaves. There would be quarters for guests, palace guards, messengers, other servants, and slaves. There would also be granaries (buildings where grain was stored), stables, toilet and bath enclosures, places to cook in wet weather (otherwise they cooked outside), and other storage and utility buildings.

Alhaji Ado Bayero, emir of Kano in 1965. In 1515, Askia Muhammad the Great conquered Kano. Here the emir is escorted by modern police in blue uniforms and royal bodyguards (*dogari*) in traditional red and green gowns. On horseback under an ornate sunshade topped by a golden symbol, the richly dressed emir resembles descriptions of some medieval West African rulers.

Lost in Translation

It is important to remember that the Arab informants and writers describing North Africa were translating everything they heard into Arabic. Translation requires making vocabulary choices, and some of the words they chose are probably inaccurate and misleading. Clearly, there was some confusion about the word "Ghana." Also, "domed buildings" probably refer to the small, circular mud-brick houses with cone-shaped thatched roofs (roofs made from bundles of straw) that since ancient times have served as special huts and individual residences in the Western Sudan.

Before Islam came to the Ghana Empire, the king practiced only the traditional Soninke religion. He would have had a shrine (a holy place) for personal spiritual objects. After the kings became Muslims (probably toward the end of the 11th century), there would be a small mosque for him and any other Muslims who lived in or visited the royal compound. All of this would be inside the royal walls and would be considered "the palace."

THE ROYAL COURT

Objects found in cemetery excavations show that Ghana had a thriving, prosperous economy. The way al-Bakri described the splendid royal court of Tunka Manin fits nicely with that evidence. However, his description of the clothing is probably flawed. He said only the king and his designated successor were allowed to wear "sewn clothes," and that seems unlikely. (Historians are not sure what he meant by "sewn clothes.")

In any case, al-Bakri mentioned a variety of textiles available for clothing, including silk, brocade, and cotton, depending on what the wearer could afford. He said the men shaved their beards and the women shaved their heads. The king wore many necklaces and bracelets. This is similar to the way some West African kings still dress on ceremonial occasions.

Again and again Arab writers describe the custom of people sprinkling dust on their heads in the medieval West African empires. It seems to have been an expression of humility and respect, and was required of people when they were in the king's presence. Muslims were not required to do this, because they believed that in Islam people bow only to God and never to another man.

A GOLDEN ECONOMY

According to al-Bakri, the king was assisted in administering his empire by a council of ministers and officers of the court. One of the most important government functions involved collecting a kind of customs tax called tariffs on the goods that went in and out of the empire. This was one of the main sources of revenue for the imperial treasury, and helped account for Ghana's prosperity and reputation as "the land of gold."

During the time that al-Bakri's sources were in Ghana, a tariff of one golden dinar had to be paid for every donkey-load of salt that entered the country, and two dinars were charged for the same load leaving the coun-

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Gold Dog Collars

Al-Bakri wrote that Tunka Manin wore a "high cap decorated with gold and wrapped in a turban of fine cotton," and went on to describe the scene at the royal court of Ghana as altogether splendid.

> *[The king] sits in audience or to hear grievances against officials in a domed pavilion around which stand 10 horses covered with gold-embroidered materials. Behind the king stand 10 pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold, and on his right are the sons of the [lesser] kings of his country wearing splendid garments and their hair plaited [braided] with gold. The governor of the city sits on the ground before the king and around him are ministers seated likewise. At the door of the pavilion are dogs of excellent pedigree who hardly ever leave the place where the king is, guarding him. Round their necks they wear collars of gold and silver studded with a number of balls of the same metals. The audience is announced by the beating of a drum which they call duba, made from a long hollow log. When the people who profess the same religion as the king approach him they fall on their knees and sprinkle dust on their heads, for this is their way of greeting him. As for the Muslims, they greet him only by clapping their hands.*

(Source: Levtzion, Nehemia, and J. F. P. Hopkins, editors. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981.)

try. A tariff of five *mithqals* was charged for a load of copper, and there were other kinds of goods that were charged 10 *mithqals* per load.

All gold nuggets found in the mines controlled by Ghana were reserved for the king. Al-Bakri heard that the nuggets weighed anywhere from an ounce to a pound. Ordinary people were only allowed to deal in gold dust, because otherwise they would accumulate so much gold that it would lose its value.

Al-Bakri was not writing until about 1067, so his informants' observations were made rather late in the empire's history. Arab scholars were always fascinated by stories of gold from the lands of the Sudan, and had already been talking about the wealth of the kings of Ghana for well over a century. In 889–890, al-Yaqubi published a description of the powerful kingdom of Ghana in which he said gold was found all over the country. Ibn Hawqal, writing between 967 and 988, said the ruler of Ghana was "the wealthiest king on the face of the earth because of his treasures and stocks of gold" (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins).

Nearly 100 years after al-Bakri, stories like these (sometimes no doubt exaggerated) were still coming from the Arab geographers.

Al-Idrisi, writing in 1154, described a natural gold nugget in the king's palace so big that the reins of the king's horse were tied to it.

MILITARY POWER AND JUSTICE

The government was backed by a large, powerful army, although the reported size of the army is probably exaggerated. It is said that the king of Ghana could put 200,000 soldiers into the field. Of these, 40,000 were archers, and some of the troops rode small horses. The archers of the province of Sama were especially skillful, and they used poisoned arrows. Other weapons included swords, long spears, and short javelins that were thrown.

Al-Idrisi was impressed by the "righteousness" of Ghana's ruler, who by that time had become a Muslim. Al-Idrisi described a daily procession (a kind of formal parade) to uphold justice, in which the king and his army commanders went on horseback every morning through the streets of the town. "Anyone who has suffered injustice or misfortune confronts him, and stays there until the wrong is remedied" (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins).

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Justice and Punishment

Al-Bakri describes a "truth-telling ritual" that was used to judge whether someone was guilty of a crime. These rituals require people to undergo an unpleasant or even dangerous experience. Different types of these rituals are described in various oral traditions, so they seem to have been fairly common in the medieval societies of the Western Sudan—just as they were in Europe during the same historical period. In this case it was trial by water.

> *When a man is accused of denying a debt, or having shed blood, or some other crime, the official in charge takes a thin piece of wood, which is sour and bitter to taste, and pours upon it some water, which he then gives to the defendant to drink. If the man vomits his innocence is recognized, and he is congratulated. If he does not vomit and the drink remains in his stomach the accusation is accepted as justified.*

Al-Bakri also described how some serious crimes are punished. He wrote that the "Sudan" (blacks) of Ghana ". . . observe the law that a person who falls victim to a thief may either sell or kill him, as he chooses." As for people who cheat on their wife, ". . . the law is that he should be flayed [skinned] alive."

(Source: Levtzion, Nehemia, and J. F. P. Hopkins, editors. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981.)

Personal drummers marched in front of the army commanders. These drums were beaten as the commanders rode to the palace each morning to meet the king for the daily procession. As each commander arrived at the palace gate, his drum was silenced. Four hundred years later, during the Askia dynasty of Songhay, the highest-ranking army commanders had the same custom and were called drum lords.

ISLAM IN THE CAPITAL CITY

Much of the information in al-Bakri's description of Ghana's capital involves matters of religion. He was a Muslim himself, so naturally he was very interested in how Muslims were treated in Ghana. He said there were a dozen mosques in the Muslim town, with a main one for Friday prayer.

This is still the arrangement in Islamic cities today, where everyone goes to pray together at the "Friday mosque" at two o'clock in the afternoon. The mosques had imams (prayer leaders) who collected regular salaries, and there were individuals called *muezzins* who would climb the minaret (mosque tower) to call the people to prayer.

The Muslim town also had jurists and scholars who were authorities on Muslim law, the Quran, and other religious matters. In the other town at the king's court, his interpreters, his treasurer, and most of his ministers were Muslims. Near the court of justice there was a mosque for the convenience of Muslim officials and visitors.

SONINKE TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The name of the king's town, which in Arabic was al-Ghaba, was associated with traditional Soninke religion, not Islam. In Arabic, *al-ghaba* means "the forest," and this might refer to the sacred grove. In the traditional religions of societies throughout sub-Saharan West Africa, the special location for communicating with the spirit world was a grove of trees outside the village or town.

Most of the sacred groves are gone now, but some still exist in remote areas. In the days of the great medieval empires of the Western Sudan, practically every community had a sacred grove, whether or not there were Muslims living there.

Al-Bakri said only the priests were allowed to enter the sacred grove. This is consistent with what is known from more recent times.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The King's Tomb

Although al-Bakri said no one was allowed to see the king's burial and tomb, he heard some details about it.

> *When their king dies they construct over the place where his tomb will be an enormous dome of saj wood. Then they bring him on a bed covered with a few carpets and cushions and place him inside the dome. At his side they place his ornaments, his weapons, and the vessels from which he used to eat and drink, filled with various kinds of food and beverages. They place there too the men who used to serve his meals. They close the door of the dome and cover it with mats and furnishings. Then the people assemble, who heap earth upon it until it becomes like a big hill and dig a ditch around it until the mound can be reached at only one place.*

This form of royal burial is sometimes considered to be evidence that the people believed their kings were also gods. Excavations at two mounds in the Inland Delta region of the Niger River revealed tombs with burial rooms. In each grave there were two human skeletons with weapons, ornaments, and beads. The tomb also contained other human skeletons and animal bones.

(Source: Levtzion, Nehemia, and J. F. P. Hopkins, editors. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981.)

Mystery and secrecy are very important in traditional religion, and some of the sacred ritual objects are not supposed to be seen by ordinary people. Others are seen only by people who are members of special societies. It is believed that terrible consequences can be suffered by people who violate these rules.

Al-Bakri mentioned that people were sometimes imprisoned in the sacred grove and never heard from again. This way of doing away with criminals would add frightening power and mystery to the rules associated with the sacred site. Contributing to the mystery of the sacred grove and the spiritual practices centered there was the practice of locating the kings' tombs within the mysterious circle of trees.

Much of what is known about the traditional religions in sub-Saharan Africa was written by Muslim Arabs and, later, Christian Europeans. Their descriptions reflected the prejudices of foreigners toward a traditional religion they did not understand or care to learn anything about.

Al-Bakri dismissed the Soninke traditional system of belief in Ghana with the remark that, "Their religion is paganism [a primitive religion] and the worship of idols" (images of gods). He introduced his descriptions of Soninke spirituality by referring to "the sorcerers of these people, men in charge of the religious cult" (quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins). In fact, it was Soninke traditional spiritual leaders, or priests, who presided over the polytheistic (belief in more than one god) religion.

The traditional priests of the Soninke and other Mande peoples have usually been blacksmiths. They knew the secrets of how to use fire to turn raw iron ore into tools and weapons that were essential for daily life—a process that was associated with magic. It was through their perceived special abilities to communicate with the spirit world that the traditional priests became guardians of the sacred grove and the religious objects stored there.

Muslim writers referred to the religious objects stored in the groves as "idols," which is a word choice that suggests there is something less than respectable about them. Some religious objects in Soninke traditional religion do look intimidating and dangerous because they are meant to cause fear and respect when seen. But there are also many masks and small statues of wood, terra-cotta (clay), and other materials that are beautiful.

The most important of the traditional religious objects were (and still are) representations of various gods and spirits. The objects were not worshipped as idols, though. Masks were worn

Secret Sites

Burial sites similar to those of the Ghana Empire have been found among another Mande group, the Mandinka of Gambia. In Gambia, the king was buried in his own home together with his weapons. His senior wife and members of his court were also buried there. The tomb was then closed, and a big mound of earth was heaped over the tomb to the height of a house.

At other times and places in Mande history, burial sites of rulers were sometimes hidden so well that nobody could ever find them again. Some sources refer to royal burials in dry riverbeds, where the grave would be covered by water during the rainy season. One reason for this custom is that it was believed evil-doers could create dangerous sorcery tools by retrieving something from a ruler's grave. Even today, it is possible to see monuments in the Republic of Mali that are said to be the tombs of famous kings, except the kings were never really buried there and nobody knows the true location of their graves.

Priests often kept spiritual objects, such as this mask from the Ntomo society of the Bamana people, in sacred groves. Ntomo masks could have between two and eight horns. Although this mask originally had six horns, only two remain after generations of use.

by dancers in musical rituals as a way of communicating with the spirits they represent, and to include those spirits in community affairs. Small statues served a similar purpose when they were given ritual offerings such as kola nuts, *dègè* (sweet millet balls or porridge), and the blood of sacrificed chickens. Many of these religious objects, including various types of masks and statuettes, are now regarded as fine works of art. They can be found in important museums in Europe and the United States.

CHAPTER 5

THE MANDE PEOPLE OF THE MALI EMPIRE

THE MANDE PEOPLE DESCENDED FROM THE INHABITANTS of the Mali Empire. Since there are no written records from that time, it is difficult for modern historians to understand the social system that existed then. There is, however, an extensive oral history and a tradition in stories that has been gathered from modern Mande people. From these stories, certain assumptions can be made about what the oral historians thought life was like. But historians cannot be sure exactly when particular details became part of the oral history.

This is a topic of ongoing debate. For example, there is a good deal of evidence that the bards (poets who recite a story associated with a particular oral tradition) were active at the royal court of Mali, just as they were elsewhere in Africa in the 19th century. The same can be said of the blacksmiths. But in the cases of other occupational groups, the evidence is scarcer.

There is also a chronicle from the Arab historian Ibn Battuta, who visited the Mali Empire in 1352–1353 and described Mansa Sulayman's court. His description is perhaps the only eyewitness account of society in the 14th century. But his record is incomplete. For example, Ibn Battuta mentions hearing the music of "stringed instruments," but he does not say which ones.

OPPOSITE
Professional speakers and musicians known as *jeliw* remain a key part of Mande society today. As they did in medieval times, they tell stories that preserve memories of the ancestors and their deeds. Sanassy Kouyaté (d. 1995) is seen here with his staff of office.

MANDE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Today's Mande people have an extremely rich history and tradition. The high point of that history was the Mali Empire. The social status of the most ancient families is based on their identification with ancestors

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Grand King Receives Dusty Visitors

Arab traveler Ibn Battuta has provided an eyewitness description of the 14th century Mali Empire. In 1325, Ibn Battuta left home in Tangier, Morocco, and set out for the pilgrimage to Mecca. He traveled the Muslim world for 24 years, and in 1352–1353 he crossed the Sahara and visited the court of Mansa Sulayman.

> *On some days the mansa sits on a platform under a tree. It is upholstered with silk. Cushions are placed upon it and a sunshade is erected. This is like a dome of silk topped by a golden bird the size of a falcon. The mansa comes out of a door in the corner of the palace with his bow in his hand and his quiver [of arrows] over his shoulder. On his head he wears a bonnet of gold fastened with a golden strap. . . . The singers come out in front of him with gold and silver stringed instruments in their hands and they are followed by about 300 armed slaves. The mansa walks slowly, pauses to look at the people, then he mounts the platform. As he sits down the drums are beaten and the trumpets are sounded. . . .*
>
> *The blacks are the humblest of people in front of their mansa and are very submissive towards him. They greet him by saying, "Mansa Sulayman ké." When he calls to one of them at his sessions in the pavilion, the person takes off his regular clothes and puts on ragged ones and removes his turban and puts on a dirty old hat, and goes in pulling up his trousers to expose his legs* [only uncircumcised boys wore shorts], *and goes forward with great humility. He then beats on the ground with his elbows. If one of them speaks to the mansa and the mansa answers him, he uncovers his back and sprinkles dust on his head and back as if he were washing himself with water.*

(Source: Levtzion, Nehemia, and J. F. P. Hopkins, editors. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981.)

who participated in the founding of the empire early in the 13th century. Members of some of these families have the status of aristocrat, or *horonw*.

Traditionally, these aristocrats were landowners and community leaders. They were expected to conduct themselves with dignity and honor, and to speak only when they had something serious to say. The senior male members of families who traced their ancestors to the village's founder were eligible to be chiefs. Some families claimed to be descended from distinguished ancestors described in the Sunjata Epic, the story of Mali's founding—including Sunjata himself.

Enterprising merchants, whose business was greatly aided by their ability to speak many languages, were constantly on the move between

village and urban market centers, and from Malian markets across the Sahara to North African destinations. There were entire fishing and hunting communities who spoke different languages than their neighbors. The same was true of slaves acquired through wars of expansion and from raids beyond the borders of the empire. More than a dozen languages would have been spoken in the far-flung territories of the Mali Empire.

One Mande group is identified by its association with Islam. This includes Muslim clerics (religious leaders) who are specialists in Islamic studies or leaders of prayer at the mosques. Their Arabic title, *imam*, has become *almami* in the Mande languages. Some of these Muslim clerics are teachers in Quran schools, where children study the holy book of Islam and are expected to memorize at least part of it in Arabic.

Some groups of craft specialists in Mande society have their own special status. Blacksmiths produce iron and forge it into farming tools, household items, and weapons that are essential to the community. Leatherworkers tan and dye animal hides and turn them into sandals, pouches, cushions, saddles, and other leather goods.

The bards, or *jeliw,* are genealogists (people who keep track of a family's history), musicians, praise singers, spokespersons, diplomats, and oral historians. A smaller group of bards called *funéw* or *finalu* specialize in reciting Islamic texts.

These specialized groups are born into their occupations. Their families have been practicing the same craft for many centuries, passing their knowledge and skills from generation to generation. The occupational specialists are collectively known as *nyamakalaw*. This term recognizes them as having special skills that are essential to the success and well-being of the village community. Traditionally, members of the *nyamakala* class only marry people who are involved in the same occupation. This helps to preserve the secrets of their craft. In the case of blacksmiths for example, in each village there is a limited amount of work for them, and people who have ancient claims to the occupation want to be sure there is not too much competition. Marrying people who already have the same knowledge and skills is a way of protecting the extended family's livelihood.

There are other occupations within the *nyamakala* class. Some are determined by gender, others by craft specialization. For example, village potters are usually the wives of blacksmiths. While their husbands use fire to turn iron-rich rock into tools, the women do the same thing to fire natural clay into pottery.

Other Cultural Influences

While the Mali Empire was based on Mande culture, there were scores of other culture groups who lived in and contributed to the greatness of the Mali Empire. The camel-riding Berber groups of the Sahara, including the Tuareg, and Sanhaja, were in control of desert transportation and commerce and were always competitors for control of the salt mines. Fula herders followed their cattle and other livestock on seasonal migrations and competed with farmers for the most productive lands. Farming communities of many different cultures across the empire produced several kinds of grains, rice, and vegetables for distribution to urban centers.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Kings of Sunjata's World

West Africans tell their history in a different way than the Arab historians. The great *jeli* Djanka Tassey Condé (d. 1997) lived his entire life in the small village of Fadama near the Niandan River in northeastern Guinea. This region was once part of the Mali Empire. Tassey was a member of the Maninka people. He identified himself by the name of his mother, Djanka, just as Sunjata was identified by his mother's name.

Tassey's father, Babu Condé (d. 1964), was one of the most famous *jeliw* of the colonial era, when both Guinea and Mali were part of French West Africa. Babu was descended from a line of Condé bards who trace their ancestry to people who lived in the time of Sunjata early in the 13th century, when the Mali Empire was founded.

Like all of the most knowledgeable bards who have amazing memories, Tassey could not read or write. But from his father he gained a vast knowledge of oral tradition. This is the history of the Mali Empire. It took him six sessions of five to six hours each to narrate the text from which this excerpt is selected. The word *naamu* after each of Tassey's lines is spoken by an assistant, who encourages the speaker by saying *naamu* ("We hear you!" or "That's right!").

The seven Mande kings who ruled
Manden, *(Naamu)*
The first of those kings was the
Condé ancestor, Donsamogo
Diarra. *(Naamu)*
He fought to gain the Mande kingship.
(Naamu)
He loved Manden, *(Naamu)*
He built Manden. *(Naamu)*
Those of you who say you are
Condé, you have power. *(Naamu)*
The next in the leadership of
Manden was the Kulubali's
ancestor, Kani Simbon. *(Naamu)*
Kani Simbon ruled Manden and
made it prosperous. *(Naamu)*
He improved Manden without
going to war. *(Naamu)*
You cannot point to anyone who
fought against Kulubali. *(Naamu)*
He ruled and was able to improve
Manden. *(Naamu)*
To the end of his reign he never
fought with anyone. *(Naamu)*
The next to that was the Kamara
ancestor,
Tabon Wana Faran Kamara of Sibi
Mountain. *(Naamu)*
That is the Kamanjan you were
talking about. *(Naamu)*
(You heard it?) *(Naamu)*
He did well with Manden and
made it prosper. *(Naamu)*
Anyone who rebelled against
his rule,

They would be captured and
brought back into line. *(Naamu)*
He was never captured or
defeated in war. *(Naamu)*
If you are narrating a history, *(Naamu)*
Tell it the way it happened. *(Naamu)*
From the time my eyes were first
open up to now, *(Naamu)*
None of our elders have ever
told us,
That these people were captured
by any battle commander. *(Naamu)*
The next to that is the ancestor of
the Danaba,
Tenen Mansa Konkon of Kirina. *(Naamu)*
He descended from the
Kamissoko. *(Naamu)*
He also did well with Manden. *(Naamu)*
From beginning to end of
his reign,
He was the walking stick that
Manden leaned on. *(Naamu)*
(You heard it?) *(Naamu)*

All those that I have just
counted, *(Naamu)*
No battle commander ever
captured them. *(Naamu)*
Anyone who rebelled against
these people, *(Naamu)*
After they made their laws…
that brought progress to
Manden, *(Naamu)*
After they united so they could
combine their strength, *(Naamu)*
All of those kings, *(Naamu)*
When it was time for one of them
to rule, *(Naamu)*
The seven regions would unite, *(Naamu)*
They would help him with his
kingship, *(Naamu)*
Up to the end of his reign. *(Naamu)*
But for war to break out, *(Naamu)*
It was because of Susu
Sumanguru. *(Naamu)*
(You heard it?)
Susu Sumanguru was the sixth
mansa of Manden. *(Naamu)*
The seventh mansa was Ma'an
Sunjata. *(Naamu)*

Sunjata's father Maghan Konfara
was the mansa. *(Naamu)*
After the reigns of all those other
people,
It is God who chooses from
among the people. *(Naamu)*
Now in the meeting that took
place, *(Naamu)*
The country was put in the care
of Maghan Konfara. *(Naamu)*
This is about how Sunjata was
born. *(Naamu)*

(Source: Conrad, David C., editor. *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples.* Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004.)

Blacksmiths are usually woodcarvers as well as ironworkers. They carve handles for iron tools and sculpt masks and small statues for ceremonial rituals. Some blacksmiths become goldsmiths who specialize in turning the gold of Mande into beautiful bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and other ornaments that are sold according to their weight. Other blacksmiths specialize in brick-making and building construction.

THE BARDS OF MANDE

Bards throughout the Western Sudan, from the Atlantic coast to beyond the Niger Bend, are popularly known by the term *griot* (pronounced *gree-oh*). But in Mande culture they are called *jeliw* or *jelilu* (the singular is *jeli*). They are the artists responsible for maintaining the lively oral tradition that recalls the deeds of the early ancestors. Their story telling keeps these ancestors and their actions alive in the community's collective memory.

As the main narrators of oral tradition, the *jeliw* have been responsible for preserving stories that express what the Mande peoples believe happened in the distant past. Stories of the ancestors were passed from one generation of *jeliw* to the next, down through the centuries. The Mande aristocratic families frame their own identities by recounting how they descended from the ancestors described in these stories. As specialists in maintaining the oral history of their culture, *jeliw* are known to their own people as Guardians of the Word.

The spoken word is believed to carry great power that can be a force for good or evil. In early times, the *jeliw* served as the spokespersons of chiefs and kings, and were therefore responsible for the reputation the king had in the community. Generations of *jeli* families were permanently attached to leading households and ruling dynasties. The rulers provided them with everything required to support their families in exchange for their services in the verbal arts. The *jeliw* fulfilled these responsibilities with praise songs and narratives describing the great deeds of the leader's ancestors.

As advisers to distinguished people, *jeliw* encouraged these leaders to achieve high goals by reminding them of the examples set by their heroic ancestors. The *jeliw* would point out mistakes through the use of proverbs, and advise the leaders to do better when they threatened to fail in their duties.

The *jeliw*'s own security depended on their rulers' political power and social prestige. As a result, the stories they told tended to be biased in favor of their employer's ancestors, at the expense of their rivals and enemies.

DUGHA, CHIEF *JELI* OF MANSA SULAYMAN'S COURT

The best description of a *jeli* from the medieval period comes from Ibn Battuta, an Arab historian who visited the Mali Empire in 1352–1353 and described its court (as quoted in Levtzion and Hopkins's *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*). Standing ready to address the people with whatever the *mansa* wished to communicate was Dugha, his chief spokesman.

As chief of the *jeliw*, Dugha was one of the best-dressed people at the Mali court. He wore a turban, fine garments of silk brocade, and boots with spurs. From his waist hung a sword in a golden sheath, and

CONNECTIONS

The Mande *Bala*

One of the most famous musical instruments in Mande culture is the *bala*. It has a bamboo frame bound together by strips of leather. Dried rosewood slabs are fastened to the frame by cords. The number of slabs on the *bala* ranges from 11 to 20, with 19 being the most common. Each slab is a different length, thus producing different tones when struck by the player's mallets, which are tipped with rubber (or latex) tapped from wild trees.

Fastened beneath each slab is a small gourd that acts as a resonator. The gourd has two small holes in its sides that are covered with a thin membrane made from spider web or tissue paper. When the slabs are struck, air passes through the gourds and makes the membrane vibrate.

The *bala* is a traditional Mande instrument, and often played during sacred rituals or celebrations.

he carried "two short lances, one of gold and the other of silver, with iron tips." Anybody who wanted to address Mansa Sulayman had to speak to Dugha, who would pass on the message.

While Ibn Battuta was in Mali, he attended the celebration that follows Ramadan (the Muslim holy month of fasting). Dugha was the main performer. During the two-day festival, the *mansa* would come out and take his place on his raised throne. The usual bodyguard was present with its ceremonial swords and lances. On the day described by Ibn Battuta, Dugha came out with his four wives and about 100 young women dressed in fine clothes and wearing gold headbands decorated with silver and gold ornaments.

Seated at the center of everything, Dugha performed just as *jeliw* do today. He played the *bala* (a kind of xylophone) and sang praise songs that commemorated the *mansa's* military campaigns and praised his ancestors from the time of Sunjata. The women (a female *jeli* is a *jelimuso*) sang a chorus and strummed on single-stringed harps. There were 30 boys playing drums while others performed as acrobats and twirled swords.

At the end of Dugha's performance he was handed a purse from the *mansa*, with a public announcement that it contained 200 *mithqals* of gold dust. The other court officers also rewarded Dugha with the amounts appropriate to their rank. Even today, when anyone hears a *jeli* praising their ancestors, they are expected to give him money.

STRINGED INSTRUMENTS

When Ibn Battuta mentioned seeing stringed instruments at the Mali royal court, he gave no details. So there is no way of knowing which ones he actually saw. Several of the Mande stringed instruments are types of calabash harp. Calabashes are the dried shells of gourds. In Mande society, in addition to being used as containers of all sizes, they serve as resonators for various kinds of musical instruments.

Used in a harp, the calabash is like the body of a mandolin but the sound hole is on the side. The resonator has a long bamboo neck that is usually spiked all the way through the calabash. It holds anywhere from three to 21 strings, depending on the type of harp.

Many of the large harps have a "buzzing leaf" attached to the top of the neck. The buzzing leaf is a curved rectangle of tin with a V-shaped piece cut out of the front side and tiny metal rings inserted

through holes around the sides. When the instrument is played, the leaf vibrates and creates a buzzing sound to accompany the music.

Two kinds of large, deep-toned harps with slightly curved necks are played to accompany praise songs for hunters. The *simbi* has seven strings and is tuned to a heptatonic scale (a scale with seven tones, as opposed to the eight-tone scale used in Western music). The *donso ngoni* (*donso* means "hunter" and *ngoni* means "harp") has six strings and is tuned to a pentatonic scale (a scale with five tones). A slightly smaller version of the *donso ngoni,* the *kamalen ngoni,* is played by young men at youth gatherings of all kinds, including weddings.

The *bolon* is larger and more deeply toned than the hunters' harps. It was traditionally played to send soldiers into battle and to praise them after victorious campaigns. The *bolon* appears to be the oldest style among existing Mande harps. It has only three or four strings and a neck that is curved like the bow of a hunter or warrior.

This large calabash harp called a *bolon* has a neck curved like a hunter's bow, and music praising successful hunters is played on it.

The tradition of playing harps may have started in antiquity with men returning from the hunt or battle plucking the strings on their bows and singing about their accomplishments. This could be why the hunters' and warriors' harps and music are not part of what the *jeli* does. There are no social restrictions regarding who plays harps, although hunters' praise singers are often blacksmiths (possibly because they usually make the instruments).

There are two Mande stringed instruments that are not harps. One of them is called the *dan* in some regions, and the *kòwòrò* in others. It has a calabash resonator, but is unlike the other stringed calabash instruments played by Mande musicians. There is an individual neck

CONNECTIONS

Mande Musicians Today

Dozens of Mande musicians from Mali and Guinea are internationally famous recording stars. Some are from *jeli* families, although many are not. Among the most famous male musicians from Mali is Salif Keita (who is believed to be a descendant of Sunjata). He started his career with the Rail Band. Toumani Diabaté's 1989 record, *Kaira*, made history as the first solo album featuring the *kora*. Among more than a dozen world-famous Mali female singers are Oumou Sangaré, who first gained fame in 1989 with lyrics about women's social issues in her album *Moussoulou* (Women); and Rokia Traoré, who has a reputation as a musical rebel. Other top female singers of Mali include Kandia Kouyaté, Amy Koïta, Mah Damba, and Hawa Diarra.

Mory Kanté is among the most famous musicians from Guinea. He started playing the *bala* and later learned both guitar and *kora*. Currently, the number-one recording star in Guinea is the *jeli* Sekouba Bambino Diabaté. He started his career with Bembeya Jazz, and his third solo album is *Sinikan* (Words of Tomorrow). Large music stores in the United States sell the CDs of all these Mande recording stars, and many more.

for each string. The six necks are flat, flexible sticks spiked right through one side of the calabash and out the other. At the top of each neck, a string is attached that extends down across the curved surface of the calabash and over a small cylinder bridge. Unlike the Mande harps, the opening of the calabash resonator is not covered by animal skin, and the open side faces away from the musician.

The other stringed instrument that is not a harp also does not have a calabash resonator. The *nkoni* or *ngoni* is a kind of plucked guitar. Along with the *bala* and *kora*, it is the third of the Mande musical instruments that is traditionally played only by *jeliw*. The *nkoni's* resonator is made of wood hollowed out like a miniature canoe. Stretched over the hollow is an animal hide, with a sound hole in the center. It has a wooden neck and three to seven strings.

SLAVERY IN MANDE SOCIETY

From ancient times to the middle of the 19th century, one of the biggest groups within Mande society was slaves. In a great medieval state like the Mali Empire, many slaves were captured during wars of expansion. Slaves were an extremely important part of the economy because their labor had great value. They also brought in wealth when they were sold across the trans-Saharan trade routes.

When soldiers returned from a successful raid or battle, roughly half the loot, including slaves, was taken by the ruler on behalf of the state. Many slaves were exported across the Sahara or traded in sub-

Saharan regional markets. When Mande rulers required horses from neighboring kingdoms, they sent slaves to be exchanged for them.

In the 18th century, when captives arrived in the Bamana kingdom of Segu, there was a period of transition when their former identity was taken away. They were given new names. They would have their heads shaved into special patterns that indicated their slave status.

A person who was already a slave when he was captured would have a lower status than a formerly free man. A formerly free man could be bought back in exchange for two slaves if his family could afford it. If, for some reason, the ransom failed to arrive and the captive had been a chief or a man of proven ability, he might be placed in some position of responsibility. On the other hand, if he was considered a threat because of political influence, a tendency toward violence, or an inclination to escape, he was quickly sold or put to death.

Skilled craftsmen such as blacksmiths, or *jeliw* who were highly prized for their musical and verbal skills, often avoided becoming

CONNECTIONS

People of the Cliffs

The Muslim rulers of the Mali Empire had no problem with making slaves of non-Muslims. They would send out small raiding parties to capture "unbelievers" in their villages and make them servants, farmers, and soldiers. Or they would send them across the Sahara to be sold in North Africa.

Sometime in the 15th century, non-Muslim peoples called Dogon fled to a region called the Bandiagara Plateau. Here they could defend themselves from slave raiders by building their villages among big rocks at the base of high cliffs that extended for 125 miles.

Using mud bricks and stone, the Dogon build their houses and granaries in a unique style that makes them look like they grew naturally out of the cliffs. In 1890, French colonizers put an end to slave raiding. Some Dogon moved out to their savanna farmlands below, but most of them still occupy their unique houses in villages beneath the cliffs.

Dogon houses are made of mud brick. The tiny rectangular buildings with thatched roofs are granaries, and the larger buildings are residences.

slaves. They would simply enter the service of their captors and continue to practice their occupations. In the case of a woman of high status, it was possible for her to become a wife of one of her captors.

If a captive who had previously been free was from a family that held the kind of special relationship, known as *senankuya*, with the captor's family, he would probably be freed. A legendary example of this happened when a chief named Nyenyekoro knew he was going to be attacked by the army of Segu, led by Faama Da Diarra. He also knew he had no chance against their superior strength. He told all his advisers to take off their clothes, thus reducing their social status to the level of uncircumcised boys. With sandals dangling from his ears and an artificial tail dragging behind, Nyenyekoro led his group out of town

The Social Custom of *Senankuya*

In Mande society, ancient family names that are very common, such as Keita, Kulubali, Koroma, Kamara, Traoré, and Condé, have special significance. They have been passed down from the earliest ancestors, who are described in the oral tradition as great heroes and heroines. Mande people with these names take their basic identities from the heroic deeds said to have been performed by their ancestors.

In these oral traditions, some of the ancestors endured great suffering or experienced great adventures together. Sometimes these included wars with one another that were later settled peacefully. These historic experiences caused special bonds to form between them.

These special relationships are called *senankuya*, or "joking relationships." *Senankuya* recognizes the special ancient bonds between the families through the social custom of publicly insulting and ridiculing each other. For example, whenever two people with the ancient names of Traoré and Condé meet, one of them will always announce that the other is his or her "slave." That person will laugh and deny it, and call the other person their "slave."

The two people may continue laughing and insulting each other for several minutes, making up hilarious stories about each other's families. Local bystanders appreciate the humor and probably do the same thing when they meet someone from a family with whom they have a *senanku* relationship. These kinds of exchanges remind the members of the two families of their historic relationship and demonstrate that nothing truly bad can ever occur between them.

to meet the invaders. He introduced himself and his men as Traoré, a family line that he knew had a special relationship with the Diarra. By thus allowing himself to be ridiculed, he saved his town from being destroyed and his people from enslavement.

Once settled into the community, ordinary slaves could find partners and have their own families. Slaves born in their master's house had a different status than the ones who were captured in war. The status of one houseborn slave relative to another depended on the individual's duties in the household and the owner's rank in the overall community. For example, a slave born in a chief's house would rank higher than a slave born in the home of a merchant. Any slave born in the community would rank higher than a newly arrived captive. The status of second and third generations of slaves born in the community would gradually become blurred, and still later generations would eventually become part of the original owner's family.

In Mande kingdoms with permanent armies (as opposed to militias organized only in time of need), soldiers lived in villages that were populated by slave families who lived pretty much like everyone else. The slaves farmed and produced food for the army and for urban markets.

Descriptions of the court of Mali say that the royal bodyguard was staffed by slaves. Courageous, hard-fighting warriors who were taken captive in battle were often put in the army that captured them and could rise to positions of power. Sakura, who became one of Mali's greatest rulers, was a former slave.

THE HUNTERS OF MANDE

Any man could be a hunter. He accomplished this by becoming an apprentice (a person who learns a skill by working for someone who has that skill) to a master hunter and being accepted into a hunter's association.

The determining factor in being accepted into a hunter's association was not how many animals the hunter killed, but his moral character. For example, a man who was known to be a drunk or to have casual relationships with many women would be rejected.

In ancient times, a man's apprenticeship ended when he killed three of the largest and most dangerous animals, such as the elephant, lion, buffalo, or hippopotamus. In more recent times large animals are very scarce, so an apprenticeship can last indefinitely.

In early times, master hunters carried the title *simbon*. They received praise names based on their exploits, such as Lion Killing

In the days of the Mali Empire, some of the people who refused to become Muslims were called Bamana. The amulets on this Bamana hunter's shirt protect him from all danger. Under all those protective medicines (*boliw*) the shirt is woven of cotton cloth called *bogalan* or mud cloth because the dyes used to decorate it contain a special kind of mud.

Hunter (Jarafaga Donso) or Buffalo Killing Hunter (Sigifaga Donso).

Historically, authority in Mande was usually based on age, with the oldest son of a particular family succeeding the father. But with hunters, the chief was the one who was accepted into the society before everyone else. Among the regular members, a son or younger brother who joined first was senior to his father or older brother.

The chief of the hunters did not need to be a great hunter or of any particular social status. He could even be the descendant of a slave. He would remain chief until his death, when he was succeeded by the next hunter with seniority in the association.

When there were large wild animals that killed cattle or destroyed crops, the hunters' association would hold a meeting before a big group hunt. In modern times they meet on special occasions, such as Mali's Independence Day (September 22). The most frequent occasions for hunters' association meetings are funeral ceremonies for dead hunters. There is one ceremony held seven days after the death, another 40 days after, and a commemorative ceremony every three to seven years.

At the funeral ceremonies, hunters march in circles and fire their guns into the air. Musicians play the calabash hunters' harps and sing songs praising the dead person or recounting the legendary feats of famous hunters of the past.

In traditional belief, when hunters go into the bush to pursue wild game they are entering the land of potentially dangerous genies and other spirits. The habits and locations of bush spirits and strategies for dealing with them are among the most important things apprentices learn from master hunters. Genies are believed to inhabit certain kinds of trees (especially the baobab), unusual rock formations, and bodies of water. Hunters have to know how to protect themselves.

One strategy is to form alliances with genies who become protectors and guides. Master hunters carry various kinds of protective

objects called amulets, and are believed to be sorcerers. They never display their powers in public, but are respected and feared in their villages and towns.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN MANDE SOCIETY

All African peoples had their own religions thousands of years before they felt the influence of any outsiders. In sub-Saharan Africa, traditional religion probably developed in prehistoric times along with other fundamental aspects of culture. There are rock paintings in southern Africa dating from 26,000, 6000, and 2000 B.C.E. that appear to represent a continuous tradition of religious ritual practiced by hunters.

Eventually, many African systems of thought were influenced by the introduction of Islam and Christianity. Nevertheless, in most African languages there is no word for "religion" because the spiritual and ritual aspects of society are simply part of life. These cultural values can be referred to as "traditional religions" or "belief systems."

At all times in Mande society, including the days of the Mali Empire, spiritual considerations have been a part of just about every aspect of daily life. People in traditional rural villages are always conscious of how their actions affect their relationship with invisible inhabitants of the spirit world. There are names for different supernatural beings, but nowadays most people refer to them all as genies, which comes from the Arabic word *jinn*.

In the great oral tradition of Sunjata, which provides much information about what the Mande bards believe life was like in the days of the Mali Empire, virtually every deed performed by the heroic ancestors takes into account their relationship with the world of the spirits.

Early in the 13th century, rulers of Mali were starting to become Muslim and some of them made the pilgrimage to Mecca. But the vast majority of their subjects kept their spiritual connections to the traditional religion of their ancestors. Nowadays, most people who live in the ancient imperial heartland claim to be Muslims. But many of them practice Islam and also keep something of their ancient belief system.

Everyone in Mande society understands that humans and genies share the world. But some occupations demand particular knowledge and skill in communicating with supernatural beings. Shrine priests, carvers of masks and other ritual objects, herbalists, healers, midwives (women who deliver babies), and various kinds of fortunetellers confront

Group Insurance

Today, when Mande hunters join their local association, they pay a membership fee. This serves as a kind of insurance fund for any members injured by a wild animal or wounded by a malfunctioning weapon.

Worship as Part of Life

Today, there are mosques for the Muslims in Mande communities. But there is no house of worship for traditional Mande religion. People practice their religious beliefs at all times and with virtually everything they do. For rural villagers in traditional culture, the activities of farming, hunting, fishing, trading in the weekly market, walking through the bush between villages, performing daily chores, and even speaking have spiritual significance. Music, song, dance, oral narrative, sculpture, and crafted works of all kinds are expressions of the Mande system of belief. They can be seen and heard in performance, media, museums, and galleries worldwide.

supernatural beings daily and specialize in pleasing and manipulating the ones who shape the course of events.

Whatever goes wrong, the Mande do not believe in accidents. Whether it is illness, early death, failure to have children, injury, crop failure, business failure, or any other kind of problem, it is thought to be caused by an enemy, an evil genie, or by being exposed to uncontrolled spiritual energy called *nyama*. Proper relations with genies and correct manipulation of *nyama* can result in good health, achieving one's goals, and prosperity.

Of all the occupational specialists, blacksmiths are generally regarded as the most qualified to mediate between humans and genies. Not all blacksmiths are willing or able to attempt the manipulation of spiritual power, though. And other people such as bards (*jeliw*) and knowledgeable elders (including women) share these tasks. One reason blacksmiths have the inside track on healing and sorcery is that their ability to create essential tools and weapons out of raw materials seems like magic.

It is blacksmiths who perform circumcisions, but only a few dare to. This is because the powerful spiritual force called *nyama* is released in dangerous amounts as soon as the flesh is cut. It is believed that if the circumciser does not know how to protect himself, he can be blinded.

When dangerous animals are killed, they release enormous amounts of *nyama*, so many of the greatest hunters have been blacksmiths. Other magical practices dominated by blacksmiths include rainmaking and divination (predicting the future).

Divination is an important part of the Mande belief system, and specialists have many ways of doing it. One of the most common methods is to throw cowrie shells onto a woven straw mat or tray. The usual number of cowries is 12, but totals of 16, 20, and 40 are also used. The scattered cowries are interpreted according to the patterns in which they land.

Small stones can also be thrown and interpreted according to how many stick in the diviner's hand or are snatched up in a quick follow-through motion. Other diviners drop kola nuts or horsehair into a calabash full of water and interpret how they float or read their patterns. Still others use a leather pouch or "black bag" containing small bones, dried bits of animals such as tails, scraps of paper with symbols drawn on them, and other mysterious objects.

In sand divination the diviner smooths a pile of special sand into a flat surface. While saying incantations (magic words), he or she draws

and interprets symbols on the sand while guided by a supernatural force.

Many diviners are blacksmiths, but anyone who has the necessary power and vision can practice the art, including women. Some diviners are Islamic practitioners called *moriw*. Although they are Muslims, they maintain contact with the spirits of pre-Islamic belief. These kinds of diviners have been seen using both cowrie shells and pages of Arabic text to see into the spirit world.

Diviners, then and now, combine traditional beliefs, such as fortune-telling using shells, with the Muslim religious beliefs of the Quran.

Diviners function as problem solvers and healers. Someone who is having trouble getting pregnant will go to a diviner for help. So will a person with illness in the family or a run of bad luck. The diviner interprets the signs to identify the source of the client's problem, perhaps finding that the client has a human enemy somewhere or has accidentally offended a spirit.

The diviner will then prescribe a solution that often involves making a sacrifice. The nature of the sacrifice depends on the seriousness of the problem. It could range from a few kola nuts or a chicken to something as valuable as a goat or a cow.

ASKIA MOHAMED
1493 KALIF DU
TEKROUROUR 1528

CHAPTER 6

THE SONGHAY PEOPLE

THE SONGHAY PEOPLE OF TODAY LIVE IN A REGION THAT extends into three modern countries: Mali's Niger Bend area, down the river in the Republic of Niger, and northern Benin. In rural villages of the Niger Bend and the Inland Delta, the Songhay are mainly millet and rice farmers.

Songhay society consists of peoples of various cultures who speak different languages and come from neighboring regions. It therefore embraces a wide variety of customs and influences from elsewhere. For example, the oral artists of the Songhay are very similar to the Maninka and Bamana bards known as *jeliw*. Like the *jeliw*, they specialize in speech, music, and storytelling. But they are known by the Soninke term *gesere*, which probably indicates that they originated in ancient Ghana. When *gesere* narrate their oral traditions, they sometimes use a secret language, which consists of Soninke with some words of Fula and Bamana.

Songhay society is organized and governed according to social status. People of highest rank are the descendants of nobles and rulers of the Songhay Empire. One distinct social group is made up of people claiming to be descendants of the great ruler Sii Ali Beeri, for example. Another group identifies itself as descendants of Askia Mohammed Touré. They share power and influence with local Muslim religious leaders. Depending on the size of the community, there might also be a government official in residence.

Many of the ordinary peasant farmers, craftsmen, and domestic workers are descended from conquered peoples of medieval times. The ancestors of these groups were captives and slaves. Slavery made

OPPOSITE

Nobody knows what Askia Muhammad actually looked like, but this statue stands in a street of Gao because his memory is so important to the Songhay people of today.

up a large part of the population of the Songhay Empire. The people of entire towns and regions might be considered captive slaves if their city was conquered by Songhay armies. As slaves, they could be sold or sent anywhere. If they were farmers or craftsmen, however, they might not

A Mix of Cultures

When describing societies that were part of the great medieval empires, it is essential to remember that individual cultures cannot be separated out as if they lived by themselves. When the Songhay lived in a particular region, they were not (and still are not) the only people there. Towns and cities of the Niger Bend and Inland Delta are populated by a great mix of cultures. In addition to Songhay, there are also Mande peoples, including Maninka, Bamana, and Dyula. All three of these groups speak similar dialects of the same basic Mande language.

In early times, one distinction between the Maninka and the Bamana was that many Maninka were Muslims, while the Bamana kept their traditional religious practices. The Dyula, who now live mainly in Northern Côte d'Ivoire, were long-distance traders in gold. They exported this gold to the Ghana Empire for the trans-Saharan trade. The Dyula continued their gold trading in the Mali and Songhay Empires. But by at least the 15th century, they had also become Muslims.

People of Soninke ancestry are also mixed with the Songhay, and are also Muslims. Their ancestors in the Ghana Empire were among the first Western Sudan populations exposed to Islam. They prefer to live in towns and cities, where many of them are in business.

Other people of Mali who can be seen mingling with Songhay in the ports and markets of urban centers include Moorish and Tuareg nomads of the desert, Bozo fishers and ferryboat men, Somono and Sorko, who also specialize in watercraft, and Fula cattle herders. Out in the countryside there are multi-ethnic villages that contain two or more of these societies. In Niger and Northern Benin, the Songhay share communities with cultures native to those areas.

In a large town or city, each culture group will have its own neighborhood. Each of these neighborhoods has a lineage head, or chief, who is probably the oldest male of a family that is known to descend from a distinguished ancestor. He represents his neighborhood in a council of notables headed by a chief, who very likely traces his ancestry to the Songhay Empire.

be removed from their homelands because they would be more productive if left where they were.

THE MEDIEVAL HIERARCHY

According to the descriptions written in the 17th-century Timbuktu chronicles, Songhay society in the 15th and 16th centuries was dominated by men. Men of the Songhay ruling class had multiple wives and concubines. This could result in one man having hundreds of children. Askia Muhammad the Great is thought to have had as many as 471 children.

When older brothers died, younger brothers inherited their goods and their wives. When the father died, the oldest son inherited leadership of the family.

There were several levels of social status in Songhay that were dependent on a person's birth. During the days of the *Askias,* the royal family and other aristocrats were considered to be of noble birth. The royal family ruled the empire and occupied the most powerful positions of government. Local nobility carried out administrative functions at the intermediate and lower levels of government.

One step below nobles in the social hierarchy were the freemen, ordinary citizens who were not born into slavery. Among the freemen were the Muslim clerics, who had all positions of religious authority.

There was also a class of people who specialized in arts and crafts such as ironworking, woodworking, pottery, weaving, dying cloth, and masonry (stone cutting). The *gesere* who played music and narrated traditional legends were among these occupational specialists. In the days of the *Askias* of Songhay, the chief *gesere* had the title *gesere-dunka*.

At the bottom of the social hierarchy were slaves who had been taken captive during wars, acquired in trade, or born into slavery. The condition and status of slaves varied widely. A fierce warrior captured in battle would be highly valued and might rise to become an officer in the Songhay army. Another member of the slave classes might simply be a farmer who was in a defeated clan. He might have to pay an annual fee in the form of goods and services.

Someone born into a family that had been enslaved generations earlier might be almost impossible to tell apart from a freeborn person. Some groups, such as the people called Arbi, were considered "possessions" of the *Askia*. They were slaves in the royal residences, bodyguards, and farmers who raised grain for the *Askias*.

THE SORKO, MASTERS OF THE WATER

The Niger River flows through much of Songhay territory and the Inland Delta is a vast region of creeks, rivers, ponds and lakes. Therefore, boats have always been very important. Dugout canoes were made by hollowing out a single tree trunk. Large boats called *kanta* were constructed by drilling holes in wood planks, sewing them together with strong twine or leather strips, and then sealing the holes and seams. Boats are still built this way, and some of the sealing material is made from a plant called *burgu*.

Several boat-building groups of the Inland Delta claim to be "masters of the water." But in medieval Songhay, only the Sorko held that distinction. Today they are generally seen as being dominant in the fishing industry. In addition to being great fishermen, the Sorko are hunters of all large animals that live near the water or in it, including elephants, hippopotamuses, crocodiles, and manatees.

The Sorko are also priests who associate with genies. One of their most important genies is Mayé, who had a genie mother and a blacksmith father. Mayé is the genie of floods and causes the river water to rise.

The original homeland of the Sorko is said to have been the ancient state of Kebbi. It was located in what is now northern Nigeria. The first boats called *kanta* that appeared in Songhay were built in Kebbi and brought up the river to Gao.

In the days of the *Askias*, the Sorko were among the socially inferior classes. The

CONNECTIONS

A Wild River Plant

Along the edge of the river in the great Niger Bend grows a plant called *burgu* that provides excellent food for horses. *Burgu* also grows out in the river itself, where it is a favorite food of the manatee and the hippopotamus, sometimes called the "river horse." This wild plant is also a favorite of humans. It has a sweet, syrupy sap with edible seeds that resemble wild rice. Local people also use it to thatch the roofs of their houses, seal the seams of leaky boats, and make soap and indigo (dark blue) dye.

Niger River and its tributaries were the strategic and economic lifelines of the Songhay Empire, so the *Askia* had to control the Sorko. The 17th-century Timbuktu historians claim the Sorko were "owned" by the *Askias*. This meant that whenever they were called on by the ruler, they had to obey his commands for water transport, whether in peace or war.

Traffic Jam on the River

One of the Timbuktu historians reported that at one time along the riverbank at Gao there were 400 *kanta* that were described as the *Askia's* barges. There were also 1,000 other boats belonging to the Sorko, and 600 or 700 other boats belonging to the *Askia's* family, traders, and other people.

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Long before Berber traders carried Islam across the Sahara Desert and introduced it into Songhay society, there were powerful traditional priests who communicated with a variety of local spirits. These priests were still around during the empire—as they are today. They are diviners and sorcerers, or *sohanci* in the Songhay language.

The *sohanci* are among the most learned people of their society. They use special ways of communicating with the spirit world to discover what seems to be the source of problems that arise among individuals and the entire community. Once the problem is identified, the *sohanci* seek solutions by conducting ritual sacrifices to communicate with the appropriate spirits.

A *sohanci* is knowledgeable about different kinds of poisons and the medicinal properties of healing herbs. Therefore, he can select from a wide variety of remedies according to the nature of the problem. He might prescribe an herbal cure. Or, depending on the seriousness of the problem, he might indicate the necessity of sacrificing kola nuts, a chicken, or a goat. If he believes an enemy is the source of the problem, the *sohanci* might use sorcery that will sicken or even kill the person responsible.

Since at least the 11th century in Songhay culture, religion has involved a combination of traditional spiritual beliefs and Islam. In Songhay, Islam has been regarded as an additional source of power that could be combined with traditional practices. In the Kingdom of Gao and later in the Songhay Empire, Islam was a powerful force in urban centers such as Gao, Timbuktu, and Jenne, and it had at least some influence in the imperial government. Looking back at the literature on Songhay history, Islam might seem more important than it actually was, however, because the writers of Timbuktu were Muslims and regarded their own religion as very important.

In the Kingdom of Gao before it developed into the Songhay Empire, many of the merchants involved in the trans-Saharan trade were North

The Sorcerer King

In Songhay culture, the greatest hero is Sii Ali Beeri. He was a historical person who actually ruled from 1464 to 1492. But in the oral traditions of Songhay storytellers, Sii Ali becomes a mythical figure. He is called *za beri wandu*, "the great and dangerous Za," a sorcerer who commanded great magical power.

Sii Ali's mother was from a small country town whose people were not strict Muslims. Their religious leaders were *sohanci* and various kinds of healers who followed the traditional religion. As a Songhay prince, Ali received some basic instruction in the religion of Islam. But when he became an adult, he displayed more faith in the ancient ways of magic and sorcery.

When he came to power in Songhay, he ruled over Muslim traders and scholars who lived in the cities, but most of his subjects were farmers, hunters, and fishermen of the countryside who were not Muslims. Therefore, Sii Ali was able to govern most effectively by maintaining his association with both Islam and the religion of his ancestors.

African Muslim Berbers. They traded with the peoples on the southern fringe of the Sahara, including the Songhay. In Gao, a commercial and residential area with mosques was established for the Muslim merchants. Later, as Islam became increasingly influential, one of Gao's earlier ruling dynasties, probably the Maliks, allowed a mosque to be built in their own part of the city.

According to the Arab geographer al-Muhallabi (who wrote before 985), by the time that mosque was built, the ruler of Gao had converted to Islam and many of his subjects were also Muslims. This religious conversion improved relations with the Muslim traders and increased the king's influence over them. Some of the early Songhay rulers, and many of the ordinary citizens, did not necessarily regard Islam as a replacement for their traditional religion. Rather, they tended to think of it as a source of additional spiritual power. And spiritual power was something all people of the Middle Niger region valued greatly.

OFFICERS OF THE COURT AND ARMY

The historians of Timbuktu give the titles of no less than 63 offices that existed during the time of the *Askias*. That is too many to describe in this book. But here are a few of the most important and interesting.

The office of the *balma'a* existed before the time of the *Askias*, and probably originated in the Ghana Empire. In Songhay, the *balma'a* was one of the most powerful officers. He was military commander of the

The second of two famous mosques of Timbuktu, the Sankoré Mosque, was financed by a wealthy woman who was probably Tuareg. The date of construction is not known, but the first imam of this mosque was appointed around 1480.

western part of the empire and was based at Kabara, the port of Timbuktu. The *balma'a* was specially greeted with the title *tunkara*, which had been a term for Soninke royalty in the 11th century.

The *hi-koi* was a high-ranking military officer who was responsible for all river traffic. The *hi-koi* was admiral of the fleet of riverboats that carried many of Sii Ali's troops when he attacked Timbuktu in 1469 and when they laid siege to Jenne. In peacetime, the big boats carried many kinds of cargo, such as rice, from the royal plantations along the river into Gao.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Making a Quick Call from Jenne

Like any busy administrator, 500 years ago in the Songhay Empire the *mansa* of Jenne wanted the fastest kind of communication available. According to the writer, Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi (b. 1594), this is how it was done.

> *[I]f the [mansa] wants to summon to Jenne someone living near Lake Debo, his messenger goes to a gate in the wall and calls the name of the person in question. People pass on the message from village to village, and it reaches the person immediately, and he comes and presents himself.*

In 1646, al-Sadi got a job as a secretary in the government of Timbuktu. While there, he wrote his history of the Songhay Empire, *Ta'rikh al-sudan*. He said the territory of Jenne contained more than 7,000 villages that were within shouting distance of each other. They extended hundreds of miles from one end of the country to the other.

(Source: Hunwick, John. *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa'di's* Ta'rikh al-sudan *Down to 1613 & Other Contemporary Documents.* Boston: Brill, 1999.)

The *kurmina-fari* was the highest-ranking officer in the government, second only to the *Askia*. The Timbuktu historians claim that title was created by Askia Muhammad, who first gave it to his brother Umar Komadiakha in 1497. The city of Tindirma in the lakes region of the Niger Delta was the *kurmina-fari's* seat of authority. This officer had the special privilege of wearing his hat when throwing dust on his head to greet the *Askia*. Beginning in 1579, the *kurmina-fari* was put in charge of all the western provinces of the empire.

The office of *kurmina-fari* could be very dangerous for the man who held it. When Ishaq I came to power, the *kurmina-fari* was Hammad Aryu, whom Askia Ishaq had put to death. Ishaq appointed Ali Kusira as the next *kurmina-fari*, but Ali Kusira was arrogant and a tyrant.

The historian al-Sadi relates a story in which a Muslim scholar asked the *kurmina-fari* why he sold men into slavery. He asked him if he was not afraid that one day he would, himself, be sold. Ali Kusira was astonished and angry at such a suggestion, but this is exactly what eventually happened to him.

On one occasion when Askia Ishaq paid a visit to Timbuktu, he was getting into a boat at the port of Kabara. At that moment, Ali Kusira

made a public attempt to murder him. The attempt failed, and the *kurmina-fari* was forced to flee to an oasis in the desert. There he was taken and sold as a slave. He was set to work irrigating the gardens. One day he was recognized by an Arab who used to sell him horses, and he jumped into a well and committed suicide.

DRUM LORDS AND RIVAL BROTHERS

Rival brothers were half-brothers who had the same father but different mothers. Often, problems arose between rival brothers who were sons of the *Askia*. An incident that resulted from the death of one of Askia Muhammad's officers, the *benga-farma* (Governor of the Lakes), is a good example of this.

In Songhay, all of the highest ranking officers were called drum lords because they were permitted to have their own drummers as symbols of authority. Whenever the officer went anywhere, his drummer would march ahead of him to announce his arrival.

Though more often used today for musical performances, as here in Guinea in 2000, drums in medieval times were used as symbols of high office. For instance, high-ranking officials were called drum lords because they were the only people who could have their own drummers.

One of the drum lords, the *benga-farma*, died in about 1525. Askia Muhammad appointed one of his younger sons, Balla, to the office as a reward for his great courage in battle. Many of Balla's older brothers had great respect for his bravery. But they were outraged when they heard that their younger brother had been appointed to the prestigious post of *benga-farma*. They swore that when Balla went to Gao, they would split open his drum.

Balla heard about the threats of his envious brothers. He swore back at them with a terrible insult: He said he would split open the backside of the mother of anyone who tried to split his drum.

Defying his envious elder brothers, Balla went to Gao with his drummer marching ahead of him. There was a certain spot in the city beyond which nobody's drum except the *Askia's* was allowed to be sounded. But Balla told his drummer to keep drumming past this spot, and all the way until they reached the palace gate.

When the drum was heard, it was customary for the army commanders to ride out to salute any drum lord. When the officers emerged from the palace, the envious brothers who had threatened to split open the drum were among them. None of the angry brothers dared to do anything to Balla then, but they became dangerous enemies.

Later, when Askia Musa came to power and began killing off his brothers, Balla ran away to Timbuktu. But Musa had warned everyone that they were not to help his younger brother. He said if they did, they would be executed. When Balla was refused protection in Timbuktu, he went to meet with Askia Musa. The new king had him arrested and put to death.

FIGHTING OVER SALT

The salt mines of Taghaza in the Sahara Desert were about halfway between Songhay and Morocco. Because of their location, the two countries were always fighting over who would control them. The mines were an extremely important source of revenue. A steady flow of camel caravans loaded with salt made their way south to the markets of Timbuktu and Jenne, to be distributed throughout the Songhay Empire.

During the 16th century, the rulers of Morocco repeatedly tried to capture the salt mines from Songhay, or at least to force the *Askias*

Women collect sea salt on a tidal flat in Senegal, the eastern edge of the 14th-century Mali Empire.

to pay taxes on the salt. However, for most of that century Songhay was too powerful for the Moroccans to take away their salt revenues.

Soon after Askia Ishaq I took power, Mulay Ahmad, the ruler of Morocco, sent a message to the *Askia* demanding that he give up control of Taghaza to Morocco. Askia Ishaq's reply was that Ahmad would not hear news of such an agreement, and that any man named Ishaq who would take such a proposition seriously had not yet been born.

Then, to demonstrate Songhay power, Askia Ishaq I sent 2,000 cavalry soldiers across the desert to an important market town in a valley near Marrakesh. Their orders were to make a raid without killing anyone, and return immediately to Songhay. They raided the market of Bani Asbah, where caravans from across the Sahara brought their goods. The raiders looted all the goods they found in the market and returned to Songhay without killing anyone.

The importance of controlling Taghaza (because of all the revenue it brought in) continued to cause periodic struggles between

A World Famous *Arma*

The musician Ali Farka Touré (1939–2006) was an *arma*, a descendant of the Moroccans who conquered Songhay in 1591. *Farka* is a nickname that means "donkey"—a symbol of physical strength and endurance. Ali got that name because he was the 10th child of his parents, but was the first one to live beyond childhood. His father was killed fighting in the French army in World War II. After the war, the family settled in Niafunké, a Niger Delta town about 150 miles south of Timbuktu.

Beginning in 1976, Ali Farka Touré recorded 17 albums. In 1994, the album *Talking Timbuktu* (which he made with American musician Ry Cooder) won a Grammy Award. After releasing the album *Niafunké* in 1999, Ali went on perform around the world. He then settled down on his farm near Niafunké to grow rice and fruit.

From that time on, Ali was reluctant to leave his farm. But in 2005 he won his second Grammy with the album *In the Heart of the Moon* (with the famous Malian *kora* player Toumani Diabaté). Ali's last album, *Savane*, was released after his death in 2006 and received another Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary World Music Album.

Songhay and Morocco. The Songhay reaction to Moroccan efforts to take over Taghaza varied from time to time. Apparently, it depended on whether or not the *Askia* was inclined to go to war. Personal relations between the *Askias* of Songhay and the sultans of Morocco were also complicated, depending on the individual personalities and circumstances.

In 1578, a new Moroccan ruler, Mulay Ahmad al-Dhahabi, decided he wanted to control the Taghaza salt mines. He sent Askia Daud a message saying that he must hand over one year's taxes collected from Taghaza production. Instead, the *Askia* sent the sultan far more than he asked for: 10,000 *mithqals* of gold as a goodwill gift. Mulay Ahmad was so astonished at Daud's generosity that a friendship developed between them. Four years later, when Mulay Ahmad heard of the death of Askia Daud, he was greatly saddened and officially went into mourning.

In 1586, a new ruler of Morocco, Ahmad al-Hashimi, considered invading Songhay. To test the wealth and strength of the empire, he sent a spy with expensive gifts for Askia al-Hajj. The *Askia* was

unaware that the man was a spy, and did not wish to be outdone. So he responded by sending even richer gifts back to the Moroccan ruler, including slaves and civet cats. This made the Moroccan ruler all the more interested in the wealth of the territories south of the Sahara.

Some time after receiving the gifts from Askia al-Hajj, the Moroccan ruler sent an army of 20,000 men across the Sahara with orders to take control of the lands all the way to Timbuktu. However, the Moroccan army suffered terribly from hunger and thirst during the very difficult desert crossing. The survivors returned to Morocco without having conquered anything.

The Moroccan army finally did conquer Songhay in 1591. The Moroccan ruler wanted to retain control of Songhay, so he assigned troops and administrators to continue occupying Gao, Timbuktu, and Jenne. The occupying soldiers were known by the Arabic term *al-ruma*, meaning "shooters" or "musketeers." Songhay people pronounced *al-ruma* as *arma*, and this became the term used to describe the Moroccan ruling class. Most of the Moroccan troops and officers never returned to North Africa. They married the local women, and their descendants still form a social class called *arma*.

Epilogue

BY 1884, EUROPEAN INTEREST IN CONTROLLING THE natural resources in Africa had grown. Great Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, and Germany were openly competing for control of territory all over the continent. In West Africa, Great Britain, France, and Germany had each gained control of sections of the Atlantic coast. They did it both by signing treaties with local African rulers and by outright military conquest.

The Europeans did not hesitate to go to war against Africans who were trying to defend their homelands. But they wanted to avoid going to war with each other in what came to be known as "the scramble for Africa." In 1884 and 1885, a conference was held in Berlin, Germany, to lay the ground rules for the European conquest of Africa. The representatives of 14 European nations and the United States met for 13 weeks. No Africans were invited.

OPPOSITE

Music based on traditional West African rhythms continues to be a big part of the world music scene. Harouna Samake is one of Mali's most famous musicians, particularly for his skill with the *kamalen ngoni*, which is a modern version of the *donso ngoni*, or sacred hunter's harp.

FRENCH CONQUESTS

French dreams of acquiring riches and glory by controlling the Western Sudan had begun in the 18th century. At the Berlin Conference, French representatives protected their claims to the interior regions of the Upper Niger River. In the 20 years following the Berlin Conference, the French became fully committed to their conquest of the Western Sudan.

By the time of the Berlin Conference, the French already controlled the island of Gorée off the coast of modern-day Senegal and St-Louis at the mouth of the Sénégal River. The French wanted to carve a

route to the interior of Africa by continuing up the Sénégal River and then overland to the Niger River. But there were two powerful Western Sudanic empires standing in their way.

One of these empires was founded by al-Hajj Umar Tal (ca. 1796–1864), a Muslim who belonged to a group called Tukulor in the Fonta Toro region near the Sénégal River. In the 1830s and 1840s, Umar Tal established a new religious movement. He also began equipping his many Muslim followers with firearms purchased from coastal traders.

Between 1848 and 1852, Umar Tal began using the concept of jihad, or armed struggle in the service of God, as a reason to conquer many of the small kingdoms of the Western Sudan. He took over lands from the Sénégal River to the Inland Delta of the Niger. In 1861, Umar Tal's Tukulor army captured the powerful kingdom of Segu, which controlled territory that had once belonged to both the Mali and Songhay Empires.

From 1862 to 1863, the Tukulor army conquered the Fula states of Hamdullahi and Masina in the Inland Delta, and looted Timbuktu. The Fula and their allies soon rebelled, and Umar Tal was killed. His son Shehu Amadu maintained the Tukulor Empire until it was weakened by internal fighting in the 1870s and 1880s. It was finally occupied by invading French forces in the early 1890s.

The other Western Sudanic empire blocking the French route to the Niger River was founded by a Maninka named Samori Touré (ca. 1830–1900). Samori was from a family of non-Muslim traders. In the 1860s, he organized a private army to protect their business interests. Sometime in the late 1860s or 1870s, Samori became a Muslim. In 1884, he took the prestigious Islamic title of *almami* (or imam, a religious leader).

Throughout the 1870s, Samori expanded his power into the ancient goldfield of Buré and southward into the forest of what is today eastern Guinea. The populations in the territories conquered by Samori were mostly non-Muslim. By the mid-1880s, Samori had established what came to be known as the Maninka Empire in what is now eastern Guinea, western Mali, and northern Côte d'Ivoire.

To promote pride and solidarity in the population, he encouraged them to identify their state with medieval Mali. In 1888, he tried to convert the entire population to Islam. But many people rebelled and he had to withdraw that policy.

From 1881 to 1898, Samori's army fought against French forces that were trying to conquer the Western Sudan. He had more than 30,000 soldiers, and many of them carried firearms. Thousands of muskets (a type of long gun) were acquired from agents on the coast of Sierra Leone. Samori also had entire villages of blacksmiths who manufactured firearms, musket balls, and gunpowder.

As pressure from the French increased, Samori tried to move most of the people of his empire farther to the east. It proved impossible to feed so many people, though. By 1898, they were cornered and starving in the mountains of Liberia. Samori was forced to surrender to the French, who sent him to live in Gabon. Two years later he died.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Women, Calabashes, and Gold Dust

The Europeans' desire for African gold was fueled by the writings of Arab geographers and others, including Scottish explorer Mungo Park (1771–1806). This is his description of women panning for gold in one of the fields that provided gold for kings of the medieval West African empires.

> *A portion of sand or clay . . . is put into a large calabash, and mixed with a sufficient quantity of water. The woman . . . then shakes the calabash in such a manner as to mix the sand and water together, and give the whole a rotary motion, at first gently, but afterwards more quick, until a small portion of sand and water, at every revolution, flies over the brim of the calabash. . . . After the operation has been continued for some time, the sand is allowed to subside, and the water poured off. . . . The woman now takes a second calabash, and shakes the sand and water gently from the one to the other, reserving that portion of sand which is next the bottom of the calabash, and which is most likely to contain the gold. This small quantity is mixed with some pure water, and being moved about in the calabash, is carefully examined. If a few particles of gold are picked out, the contents of the other calabash are examined in the same manner . . . [she] is well contented if she can obtain three or four grains from the contents of both calabashes. Some women, however, by long practice, become so well acquainted with the nature of the sand, and the mode of washing it, that they will collect gold where others cannot find a single particle. The gold dust is kept in quills, stopped up with cotton; and the washers are fond of displaying a number of these quills in their hair. Generally speaking, if a person uses common diligence in a proper soil, it is supposed that as much gold may be collected . . . in the course of the dry season as is equal to the value of two slaves.*

(Source: Miller, Ronald, editor. *The Travels of Mungo Park*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1954.)

French soldiers based in Africa, such as these photographed in 1900, were part of the European military forces that controlled colonial West Africa for decades.

In 1893 and 1894, French forces conquered Jenne and Timbuktu. The nomadic Tuareg people of the Sahara continued to fight the French for another 11 years. In 1899, French forces captured Gao, completing their conquest of the old territories of the medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay. Under French rule, the country now known as Mali was called the French Soudan.

MODERN GUINEA

During the period of colonial rule, Guinea was referred to as the jewel of French West Africa. It had beautiful white sand beaches, Paris-style restaurants, and luxurious hotels. Guinea exported coffee, peanuts, mangoes, and pineapples.

Guinea gained its independence from France on October 2, 1958, by voting against remaining in the French Community. The people who ran the government and the technicians who maintained

utility services were angry at Guinea's vote against remaining with France. They left the country almost overnight. They took with them the plans of the water and sewage systems, ripped out electrical and telephone wires, broke up bathroom fixtures, and even removed light bulbs. Guinea was left with much of its basic support services in ruins.

Guinea's natural resources include a third of the world's high-grade bauxite (a mineral used for refining aluminum) and huge reserves of iron ore, uranium, diamonds, and gold. The headwaters of the Niger River and many of its tributaries are in the Fouta Djallon mountains of Guinea, which means they have great potential for generating hydroelectric power. But despite all its natural resources, for the first 30 years of its independence Guinea ranked among the world's poorest nations. Its natural resources have not been fully exploited because it has lacked the necessary infrastructure and political stability.

Soon after independence, the country began sliding backward under the repressive rule of its first president, Sekou Touré (1922–1984). He claimed to be a descendant of the 19th-century resistance leader Almami Samori Touré, who fought against the French.

Touré adopted a socialist economic model for Guinea, meaning the government controlled much of the economy. He imposed laws that discouraged individual ambition and eliminated private enterprise by putting the government in control of industry and

Ancient Empires Carved Up

When the European powers divided up the African continent into colonies in the 19th century, they established artificial boundaries that cut right through ancient cultures and political systems. By the beginning of the 1960s, when the former French West African colonies had gained their independence, the former territories of medieval Ghana, Mali, and Songhay were located in several different nations.

The ruins of Ghana's cities of Kumbi Saleh and Awdaghust are in southern Mauritania, the goldfield of Buré is in Guinea, and the rest of ancient Ghana is in Mali. The heartland of the old Mali Empire is divided between Mali and Guinea, but its outer territories extend into Senegal, Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso.

The former territories of medieval Songhay now lie in Mali, Niger, and Mauritania. The ancient heartland of these empires, however, was located in what is now Guinea and Mali.

These citizens of Guinea hold election posters in 2003 supporting the longtime president, Lansana Conté.

agriculture. Establishing himself as a dictator, Touré ruthlessly suppressed anyone who disagreed with his policies.

Thousands of Guinean citizens were killed or imprisoned, and it is estimated that about 2 million people out of a population of 5.5 million fled the country. Farmers could not get reasonable prices for their crops because the government set all the prices for food. These prices did not reflect the time and money the farmers had invested in producing the food. As a result, farmers could not make a profit. So they began to grow only enough to feed their families. People who lived near national borders supplemented their incomes by smuggling. Before independence, Guinea had been a food exporter. But by the 1980s it was importing about one-third of its food.

In the 1970s, Touré realized that his socialist economic approach had failed. He restored relations with France and other Western countries. But this did not make life any better for ordinary citizens. In 1982 Amnesty International, the international human rights organization, publicized the political arrests, torture, and killings that occurred under Touré's government, but the rest of the world paid little attention. When Touré died in 1984, Guinea's army stepped in and formed a new government under the leadership of Colonel Lansana Conté (ca. 1934–2008).

When the army took over, Guinea's economy had been devastated by 26 years of dictatorship. The basic support services of the country were in terrible shape. Even in the capital, public utilities such as running water and electricity were irregular or non-existent. The roads

were so poorly maintained that it was difficult for farmers to get their crops to market.

The new government under Conté introduced a 10-point program for national recovery. This plan included restoring human rights and renovating the economy. Conté was elected president in 1993. He died in December of 2008, and the military again seized power.

Captain Moussa Dadis Camara (b. 1964) is the head of a transitional government that promises to fight corruption and hold elections in December 2010. Improvements have been slow to come. Civil wars in neighboring Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire have sent thousands of refugees across the border, adding to the economic problems.

Guinea's greatest economic failing is poor agricultural production. It is blessed with a favorable climate and relatively good soil, and 80 percent of the population are farmers. But only 3 percent of the land is cultivated because in the past, the government set food prices so low that it was not profitable for farmers to farm. Instead of exporting food crops, as it did before the Sekou Touré government, Guinea still has to import food to feed its population.

MODERN MALI

The modern Republic of Mali came into being on September 22, 1960. Unlike Guinea, which lies along the Atlantic coast and has a good port, Mali is landlocked. The lack of a seaport was immediately recognized as a fundamental economic problem. Shortly after independence, Mali tried to form a federation with neighboring Senegal, which has a long Atlantic coastline. But this effort failed.

Modibo Keita (1915–1977), Mali's first president, claimed to be a descendant of Sunjata, the founder of the Mali Empire. Similar to Sekou Touré of Guinea, Keita began by establishing a socialist, one-party state. But his failed economic policies soon led to his downfall.

In 1968, Keita was removed from power by a military group led by General Moussa Traoré (b. 1936). The Traoré government gradually modified but did not fundamentally change the policies of the Keita regime.

In the 1970s, Mali tried to improve the use of its own human resources by encouraging students to extend their educations. The government guaranteed jobs to all university graduates. By the 1980s, more than 60 percent of the nation's workforce was employed by government agencies and businesses that had been taken over by the government. This stifled private enterprise and created a huge bureaucracy

Some Guinea Basics

Guinea covers 95,000 square miles and is about the size of the state of Oregon. Its population is about 10,058,000. About 85 percent are Muslim, 8 percent are Christian, and 7 percent practice ancestral religions. French is the official language, but about 40 percent of Guineans also speak Fula, 30 percent speak Maninka, 20 percent Susu, and 10 percent other languages.

In 2009, the adult literacy rate in Guinea was estimated at 30 percent. The life expectancy at birth is today estimated at about 57 years. In 2009 the per capita income in Guinea was $2,100, with 40 percent of the population living below the poverty line. The main agricultural products include rice, cassava, millet, sweet potatoes, coffee, bananas, palm products, pineapples, and livestock.

A Targui (singular for Tuareg) stands beside surrendered guns set in cement as part of this monument to commemorate the end of the Tuareg revolt in 1995.

(an administrative system with many layers and functions in which most of the important decisions are made by appointed officials). This bureaucracy was characterized by corruption, inefficiency, and mismanagement.

When Traoré took power in 1968, he kept the single-party system introduced by Keita. By the 1980s, the Malian people were calling for a democracy with competing political parties. But Traoré ignored them and maintained his power through support from the army.

In 1991, citizens in Mali's capital of Bamako were marching to protest the lack of democracy when soldiers shot some of them. This led to anti-government riots. A group of young army officers removed Traoré from power and sent him to prison. Their leader was Amadou Toumani Touré (b. 1948). Touré became greatly respected for taking the control of Mali away from the military and restoring a civilian government.

In 1992, Mali returned to democracy by electing Dr. Alpha Konaré (b. 1946) as its president. The election gave Mali a leader who had graduated from Indiana University in the United States. His wife, Adam Ba Konaré, was a university professor who published books on the Mali and Songhay Empires.

President Konaré's efforts to rebuild Mali were slowed by his country's weak economy. In 1994 and 1995, students rioted over economic hardship and soldiers had to step in. The government was also troubled by a Tuareg uprising in the far north that was settled by a peace agreement in 1995. In May 1997, Malians reelected Konaré, and in 1998 he was awarded an honorary doctorate degree at Michigan State University.

President Konaré stepped down after his two terms of office. In May 2002, Amadou Toumani Touré was elected president. His political campaign was based on a program of fighting corruption, supporting peace, and development aimed at reducing poverty.

Despite its good leadership, Mali is still one of the poorest countries in the world. Much of the northern part of the country is in the Sahara Desert, where the salt mines of medieval Mali and Songhay are still producing salt. Mali suffers from recurrent drought, the expansion of the desert, and infestations of locusts (insects who eat all the crops).

Although 80 percent of the population lives by farming and fishing, the government sometimes has to rely on international aid to make up for food shortages. Mali's mining industry exports small amounts of gold, marble, uranium, and phosphates. Deposits of bauxite, iron, manganese, tin, and diamonds have not yet been exploited because the country has been concentrating its limited capital on developing gold mining.

CROPS, MARKETS, AND FOOD

As cash crops (crops sold for export), farmers in Guinea produce palm oil, coffee, rice, cassava, millet, sweet potatoes, bananas, and pineapples. In Mali, major crops for export include rice, millet, sorghum, corn, sugar, peanuts, and cotton. Both countries raise cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, and guinea fowl, and in northern Mali the Tuareg raise camels.

Mango trees grow virtually everywhere in southern Mali and throughout Guinea. Depending on the season, local markets sell citrus fruit (oranges, grapefruit, lemons, limes), mangoes, bananas, peanuts, pineapples, avocados, tomatoes, plantains, corn, eggplants, lettuce, okra, a variety of leafy greens, and other vegetables.

Near the rivers and Guinea's Atlantic coast, fresh fish is always available. Most markets sell dried fish, freshly butchered beef or mutton (sheep), chickens, and eggs. There is rice and a variety of grains, including millet, sorghum, and *fonio*, plus sweet potatoes, cassava, fruit and vegetables, peanut butter, peppers, onions, garlic, salt, peanut or palm oil, and assorted spices.

In Mande culture since the days of the Mali Empire, special flavorings have included *namugu* (powdered leaves of the baobab tree), *sii* butter made by pounding the seeds of the *karité* tree, *dado* made from dried hibiscus blossoms or leaves, *datu* made by fermenting hibiscus seeds, and seeds from the *nèrè* plant pounded into a paste that is fermented

Some Mali Basics

Mali covers 478,819 square miles, and is about twice the size of Texas. Its population is about 12,667,000, of whom 90 percent are Muslim, 1 percent are Christian, and 9 percent practice ancestral religions. French is the official language, because Mali was a French colony until it achieved independence. The main native language is Bamana (with Maninka, which is very similar). Songhay, Fula, Dogon, Bozo, Minianka, Senufo, Tamashaq (the Tuareg language), and many others are also spoken.

In 2009, the adult literacy rate was estimated at over 46 percent. School is required for all children ages 7 to 16. The life expectancy at birth was estimated at about 50 years. The per capita income was $1,300, with 64 percent of the population living below the poverty line. The main agricultural products are millet, sorghum, corn, rice, sugar, cotton, peanuts, and livestock.

and rolled into balls to make a type of sauce called *sumbala*. *Ngòyò* looks like a small, hard, green tomato with a bitter-tasting interior, like a cross between eggplant and tomato.

In the market there are always women and their daughters selling prepared food. A favorite meal is boiled rice with sauce, seasoned with peppers, onions, and spices. The dish contains bits of meat, dried or smoked fish, or leafy greens. In some markets, goat heads with the eyes still in are a favorite, boiled and served with a very peppery sauce.

Sweets include *moni* balls made from millet flour flavored with tamarind or lemon. Another popular treat is *takura*, which is a millet cake made with five balls of soaked millet flour that are baked or steamed in a clay pot buried in the ground. *Dègè* is a kind of porridge made of pounded millet or rice mixed with sweetened milk. It is often served in a large calabash bowl and drunk with a calabash spoon. Another form of *dègè* is made by pounding millet or rice into a fine white powder. It is then mixed with a small amount of water sweetened with honey or sugar and rolled into little balls.

The *takura* or *moni*, and *dègè* balls are sometimes used by women as a sacrifice when they want to conceive a child. Little girls go around the market with loaded trays on their heads selling mangoes, bananas, and peanuts, or treats prepared at home, including *moni* and *dègè* balls or *takura* and other small cakes made of sesame seeds, peanuts, honey, and other savory ingredients.

A BRILLIANT PAST, A BETTER FUTURE

Like people in many African countries, the citizens of Mali and Guinea once had great faith in the ability of their modern political leaders to create better standards of living. However, by the 1980s they had become disappointed. They suffered great poverty and saw corruption at every level of government. Their leaders seemed only interested in self-enrichment. Plans for development usually resulted in more disappointment and hardship for the ordinary people.

At the beginning of the 1990s, both Guinea and Mali faced terrible economic problems. But during the decade, international trade began to increase, bringing gradual improvement in living standards. Nevertheless, the countries of West Africa, including Mali and Guinea, continue to suffer from a harmful reputation. Because the media places such emphasis on issues such as corruption, wars, and the AIDS/HIV epidemic, people in the United States and Europe tend to think of Africa

as a place without hope. Most people never go to Africa to see what it is really like.

It is not Africa's problems that should define it, but its people. Guinea is in the early stages of developing a tourist trade. Mali has already become a popular destination for visitors because of the

More than 10 modern countries, including Mali, Guinea, and Senegal, adjoin the ancient lands of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay.

Making the Best of Life

In the lands of the former medieval empires the standards of city life are gradually improving. A visitor to the busy capital of Bamako might even be surprised to learn that Mali is still rated as one of the world's poorest countries. The city's center is filled with people buying and selling merchandise, and the two bridges over the Niger River connecting Bamako's main districts have traffic jams. Although neighborhoods in Guinea's capital of Conakry have electricity only at night, the busy city centers are crowded with people logging on to the Internet. Traffic is congested there too, because Conakry is on a narrow peninsula with the Atlantic Ocean on three sides.

However, in the more rural towns and villages of Mali and Guinea, most houses still lack running water. Instead, there are covered neighborhood wells with hand pumps. Lines form as women and girls gather with their buckets and tubs, and socialize while waiting their turn to pump the water. The metal tubs are so heavy when filled that it takes two women to lift one onto the carrier's head.

In the thousands of communities where there is no electricity, people take advantage of nights when there is a full moon. Children will play out doors until after midnight, with the game hide-and-seek being among their favorite. When mangoes are ripe, they also keep their ears tuned to the "thump" sound of falling fruit. When they hear a mango hit the ground, they race to find it and share it among their friends.

Adults listen to battery-powered radios and portable tape players, or they may gather in a neighbor's yard to watch videos on a monitor powered by generators. Since commercial films on cassettes and DVDs have become increasingly available in these towns, enterprising individuals have built "video palaces" in the form of large grass huts with benches. Videos are rented in town and brought out to the villages for inexpensive nightly showings that are very popular with young people.

In Mali and Guinea people are also excited that American citizens elected a president whose father was from Kenya. After the 2009 U.S. elections, pictures of Barack Obama were placed in taxi windows, stores were named after him, and people sold posters of the president and his family.

ancient cities of Jenne and Timbuktu and its famous cultural attractions, including music, dance, and sculpture. Many first-time visitors to Mali and Guinea are shocked by the poverty they see, but also awed by the beauty of the landscape and the friendliness and ambition of

Much has changed in West Africa since the days of the medieval empires, but the market is still central to village life. This image shows a Mali market in 2007.

the people. They see them working hard against great odds to improve their own lives.

Whatever the hardships of modern life, the Mande and Songhay people remain conscious of the glorious heritage that links them to the medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay. On special occasions, their *jeliw* continue to tell stories of the ancestors that remind people of their history.

These famous ancestors still define the identity of the descendents who carry their names. Whenever people meet, they salute each other with their family names. In this way, there are special degrees of mutual respect among family members, and between their family and other families.

No descendants of the heroes and heroines of the medieval empires will ever forget their ancestors, because if they did, they would lose their identities and self-respect. Pride in the ancestors of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay carries over into everyone's daily life and inspires them to succeed in the modern world.

Time Line

1000–500 B.C.E.	The beginnings of iron working in West Africa.
ca. 200 C.E.	The camel is first used in the Sahara to transport goods.
ca. 500–700	The rise of the Ghana Empire.
570	The prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam, is born in Mecca.
ca. 750–950	The Songhay kingdom of Gao becomes an important end point for trade across the Sahara. This leads to increased prosperity and political influence for the Songhay in the Middle Niger River region.
ca. 1035	As one of the religious obligations of Islam, Sanhaja chief Yahya ibn Ibrahim makes a pilgrimage to Mecca. He returns with Abdallah ibn Yasin, who will be the founder of the Almoravids, a powerful fundamentalist Islamic group that establishes an 11th-century empire in the Western Sahara.
1076	The Almoravids take control of Soninke territories, sending the ancient Ghana Empire into decline.
ca. 1235	Sunjata, legendary founder of the Mali Empire, and his Mande army defeat Susu at the Battle of Dakajalan (near Kirina). They establish a new Mande state that develops into the Mali Empire.
1324	Mansa Musa, the emperor of Mali, makes a pilgrimage to Mecca.
1352–1353	The Arab traveler and geographer Ibn Battuta visits Mali and the court of Mansa Sulayman, emperor of Mali.
1460	Sii Sulayman Dama, founder of the Sii dynasty of the Kingdom of Gao, captures Mema, signaling the decline of the Mali Empire.
1469	Sii Ali Beeri, ruler of the Kingdom of Gao, conquers Timbuktu as he expands the Kingdom of Gao into the Songhay Empire.
1492	Sii Ali Beeri dies.
1493	Askia Muhammad the Great, emperor of Songhay, establishes a new Songhay ruling dynasty.
1591	A Moroccan army invades Songhay. This leads to the defeat of the Askia dynasty of Songhay; Songhay is ruled by Moroccan administrators.
1884–1885	The representatives of 14 European nations and the United States meet at the Berlin Conference to decide who will conquer which parts of Africa.
1893–1894	French forces conquer Jenne and Timbuktu.
1899	French forces capture Gao, completing their conquest of the territories of the former medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay.
1958	Guinea votes to be independent from France.
1960	The Republic of Mali gains its independence from France.

Glossary

alliance a friendship or bond between groups of people

archaeologist a scientist who studies past human life by looking at fossils, buildings, tools, and other artifacts left behind by ancient peoples

archery shooting with a bow and arrow; a person who does this is an *archer*

arid very dry

aristocrat a member of a small group of people of the highest class in a society; the adjective is *aristocratic*

artifact an object made by a person, usually something left behind by a past culture

Askia the king in Songhay

bard a poet who recites a story associated with a particular oral tradition

blacksmith someone who turns raw iron ore into tools and weapons; blacksmiths were often priests as well

calabash a tropical tree that produces large, woody gourds (a fleshy fruit with a hard skin); dried calabash gourds are still used to make containers and even as part of musical instruments

caravan a group of people traveling together, often traders

cavalry soldiers who fight on horseback

clan a group of close-knit families

cleric a religious leader or scholar, such as a priest

commerce the activity of buying and selling goods

concubine a woman who is supported by a man and lives with him without being legally married to him

courtier a person who lives at the royal court as a friend or advisor to the ruler

delta a piece of land shaped like a triangle at the mouth of a river left by flowing water made from deposits of mud and sand

descendants relatives who trace their roots back to one person

diviner someone who predicts the future, detects hidden secrets, or prescribes sacrifices to solve problems and remedies to cure illness.

drought a shortage of water that comes after a long period with no rain

dynasty a family that keeps control of a government over many generations, with rule often passed from a parent to a child

excavation an area that is dug up, usually by archaeologists looking for the remains of past civilizations and peoples

famine a dangerous shortage of food

fertile able to easily grow (for plants) or have offspring (for animals and people)

genie a magical spirit of the bush

gesere Soninke people who specialize in music and retelling oral histories

javelin a light spear that is thrown

jeli a public speaker and musician who spoke for the king, sang his praises, and told stories about important ancestors; the plural is *jeliw*

mansa the king in Mali

matrilineal something passed down through the family of one's mother

medieval from the time of the Middle Ages (the period of history from about 500 to about 1500)

mithqal a unit of gold dust currency

mosque a Muslim place of worship

nomad a person with no permanent home who moves from place to place

oasis an area in the desert that has water and growing plants; the plural is *oases*

oral tradition remembering history by telling stories

pilgrimage a journey to a special sacred place; people who take such a journey are called *pilgrims*

polytheism worshipping more than one god

praise name a substitute for a person's name that describes the person's best characteristics or deeds.

Quran the sacred scripture of Islam

reign the period during which a particular ruler rules

ritual a ceremony carried out according to laws and customs

Sahel the area on the southern fringe of the Sahara Desert where the land changes from desert to savanna

savanna a grassy plain with few trees

siege cutting off a town or fort from the outside so it cannot receive supplies and the citizens cannot escape

silt fine particles of ash, clay, or other material that is carried by running water and eventually deposited down the river as sediment

sohanci diviners and sorcerers in Songhay

sorcerer a wizard or magician; a female is a sorceress

sub-Saharan south of the Sahara Desert

successor a person who comes after another and inherits or continues in the offices they held

textiles cloth, or items made from cloth

tribute riches paid to a foreign ruler to prevent an invasion or show obedience

tyrant a ruler who uses power in a cruel and unreasonable way

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Further Resources

BOOKS

Currie, Stephen, *West Africa: Exploration and Discovery* (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Lucent Books, 2004)

An account of the exploration of western Africa by Europeans and others. The book also looks at how this exploration lead both to a greater understanding of the area and its geography, and major negative consequences for the people of the region.

De Villiers, Marq, and Sheila Hirtle, *Timbuktu: The Sahara's Fabled City of Gold* (Toronto, Ontario: Emblem Editions, 2008)

Timbuktu was a center for the gold and salt trades from the 14th through the 16th centuries. The book details the origins of the city, its relation to the Niger River, its golden ages, the coming of the Moroccans, and its long decline. There are many rich and exciting stories, maps, and black-and-white photographs.

Doak, Robin, *Empire of the Islamic World* (New York: Chelsea House, 2009)

The Islamic Empire had a great influence on the empires of medieval West Africa. This book looks at the history and extent of the Islamic Empire, focusing on the Middle East. It also examines the daily life, culture, laws, and religious practices of the Islamic Empire.

Fontes, Justine, Ron Fontes, and Sandy Carruthers (illustrator), *Sunjata: Warrior King of Mali* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Lerner Publishing Group, 2008)

This graphic novel is subtitled *A West African Hero Tale Based on the stories of the traditional storytellers of West Africa*. It was produced in consultation with David Conrad using the original *jeli* narrative from his *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande People*.

Habeeb, William Mark, *Africa: Facts and Figures* (Jackson, Tenn.: Mason Crest Publishers, 2004)

An overview of the natural features, history, economy, and cultures of the more than 50 countries of Africa. The book also looks at current problems, including poverty, hunger, unemployment, wars, and AIDS.

Maddox, Gregory H., *Sub-Saharan Africa: An Environmental History* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clio Inc., 2004)

A detailed history and analysis of the environmental forces that have helped shaped the cultures of the African continent. It tells the story of the changing African environment and shows how the continent's often harsh conditions prompted humans to develop unique skills in agriculture, raising animals, and managing the environment. Includes a chronological overview of the chapters and detailed maps.

Niane, Djibril Tamsir, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longman, 1965)

This very readable and entertaining prose version of the Sunjata epic is actually a short novel based on the classic Mande tale.

Stokes, Jamie, *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Africa and the Middle East, 2-Volume Set* (New York: Facts On File, 2009)

A detailed account of the peoples who live in West Africa and the Middle East, including information on geography, history, government, languages, art, music, religion, and culture. Each page is illustrated with drawings, photographs, maps, and timelines. A language appendix is also included.

Zurlo, Tony, West Africa: *Indigenous Peoples of Africa* (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Lucent Books, 2001)

The book begins with coverage of the rich history shared by hundreds of West African ethnic groups. Other chapters illustrate how religion, the family, and the arts are combined, from the African viewpoint. The last chapter takes a look at the future of development in West Africa.

DVD

A Visit to Ali Farka Toure (Kultur Films, 2006)

This film was made by French director Marc Huraux in 2002. Huraux visited Touré in Mali, and the musician acted as a kind of tour guide, taking Huraux everywhere from a boat ride on the river to the place where he recorded one of his albums. The film also includes live music performances and conversations between the two men. Touré shares many of his life experiences and desires. This film is in French with English subtitles.

WEB SITES

African Empires
www.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/timelines/htimeline2.htm

This site gathers a long series of time lines of African history in one place. Each time period includes links to other sites with more information. The medieval period is covered in this section of the site.

Al-Bakri's Online Guide to the Ghana Empire
www.worldbookonline.com/np/na/surf/middle/hippodrome/ghana/saihng01.htm

This Web site is presented as if al-Bakri, the Arab geographer, had written it. It includes all kinds of information about the Ghana Empire, including the capital and the king, the empire's economy and justice system, and religious practices of the time.

BBC "The Story of Africa"
www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/4chapter1.shtml

Three chapters of the very large documentary "The Story of Africa," produced by the BBC, were about the three medieval empires. This companion site features history, maps, links, and reading lists.

Mali Empire and Djenne Figures
http://africa.si.edu//exhibits/resources/mali/index.htm

Produced by the Smithsonian Institution, this site features basics about the history of the Mali Empire. It also has information on artwork found at archaeological sites in Jenne (Djenne) one of the major cities of the Mali Empire.

National Museum of African Art
http://africa.si.edu/index2.html

This is the main site of the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African Art. Click on "Radio Africa" to get free downloads of African music and interviews with experts. Click on "Collections" to explore the museum's extensive art collection. To find pieces specifically from the medieval empires, search by country, region, or ethnic group.

Timbuktu, Mali
www.history.com/classroom/unesco/timbuktu/

The History Channel has partnered with UNESCO's World Heritage Center to look at some of the world's endangered historical sites. This section reviews Timbuktu's early history, its golden age under the Songhay Empire, the contribution of Mansa Musa, the city's long decline, and current threats to its survival. The site has photos of present-day Timbuktu, maps, a time line, a study guide, and a quick quiz.

Trekking to Timbuktu
http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=510

Produced by the National Endowment for the Humanities, this site is an overview of trade in ancient West Africa. It includes maps, photos, questions to answer and suggestions for activities and projects that put knowledge of medieval West Africa to use.

About the Author

David C. Conrad holds a Ph.D. from the University of London and is one of the foremost experts on medieval West Africa. Retired as professor of African history, he is a former Fulbright Scholar and Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society. Conrad returns to West Africa every year and has recently been a researcher with Yale University, consultant with Oregon Public Broadcasting and the Discovery Channel, and lecturer for Africa travel groups. His books on medieval West Africa include *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande People* (2004).